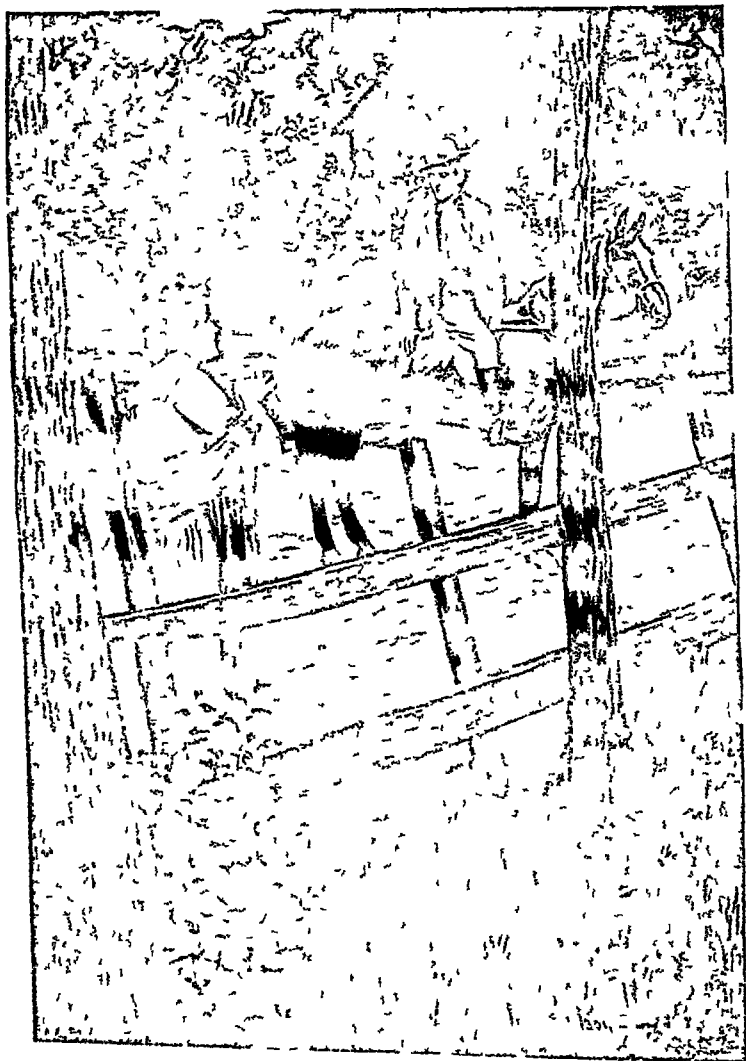


By the same Author

IN STRANGE COMPANY
THE MARRIAGE OF ESTHER
A BID FOR FORTUNE
THE BEAUTIFUL WHITE DEVIL
DOCTOR NIKOLA
THE FASCINATION OF THE KING
BUSHIGRAMS
THE LUST OF HATE
ACROSS THE WORLD FOR A WIFE
PHAROS, THE EGYPTIAN
LOVE MADE MANIFEST
THE RED RAT'S DAUGHTER
A MAKER OF NATIONS
A PRINCE OF SWINDLERS
LONG LIVE THE KING
MY INDIAN QUEEN
SHEILAH McLEOD
FAREWELL, NIKOLA
MY STRANGEST CASE
THE KIDNAPPED PRESIDENT

CONNIE BURT



‘ Maurice — you will speak to me ? ’ (Page 268)

[Frontispiece

CONNIE BURT

BY
GUY BOOTHBY

AUTHOR OF "A BID FOR FORTUNE" "DR NIKOLA"
"THE BEAUTIFUL WHITE DEVIL" ETC ETC

ILLUSTRATED BY OSCAR WILSON

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CHAPTER I

SIR PETRE OGILVIE was of the old school. While I use this term I am not quite sure that I know exactly what it means. At any rate he was a choleric old gentleman ; his language oftentimes more forcible than polite ; he believed in the old-fashioned state dinners, of many and heavy courses, and hated what he called " French Kickshaws " with an intensity that was only equalled by his affection for sherry which had doubled the Cape, and for port that had grown cobwebby in his own cellar. On the Magisterial Bench he was the terror of all evil doers, and for my part I firmly believe he would have been more lenient to a murderer than a poacher, had the pair come before him. Though he could not afford the expense, he would rather have died than have given up his hounds—or have reduced the number of horses in his stables by a single animal. It is proverbial that on one occasion his meek little wife took it upon

herself to remonstrate with him on this score, putting forward as her argument that half of the animals were without sufficient work, while the other half, for that self same reason, were twice as expensive as they should have been.

"My father had sixteen horses in his stables," thundered the baronet in reply, "and sixteen horses I will have. If there's to be economy, madam, let it be when I am in my grave, and cannot see it. While I live Ogilvie Hall shall be worthy of its traditions. When I am gone Maurice can be as cheese-paring as he pleases."

After this tirade his poor wife never again ventured to renew her protests, and the style of living at the Hall continued as it had done during Sir Petre's time and that of his father and grandfather before him. Under these circumstances it is scarcely to be wondered at that the heir to the property grew up with what might well be described as extravagant notions. He was a high-spirited lad, who feared no one, with the exception of his father, and a certain grim old maiden aunt, who paid an annual visit to the Hall. During the time she was his guest, even the lord of the manor found that it behoved him to be upon his

best behaviour. This lady, Miss Priscilla Ogilvie by name, was some five years Sir Petre's senior, and, as Maurice used afterwards to declare, she possessed a tongue that was like a two-edged sword. She had disapproved of her brother's marriage, and never failed to acquaint him of this fact several times during her stay. Even her sister-in-law's presence on such occasions did not make the least difference.

"Petre was always a fool," she would assert, with what was almost a snarl. "What he saw in you, Maria, I cannot for the life of me imagine. You should have married a parson, while he should have married Sarah Haultingtower, who would have brought him fifty thousand pounds, even if her nose is crooked and she has hands like a milkmaid."

"Are we not taught to believe that marriages are made in Heaven, dear Priscilla?" poor Lady Ogilvie would meekly remark, as soon as she could get a word in.

"Fudge and fiddlesticks," would be Miss Priscilla's answer. "If Providence bothered itself at all with your marriage, then all I can say is that it might very well have been better employed. Now you needn't look as if you were going to cry, Maria, for if you do I shall

leave the room I give you fair warning. One must hear the truth sometimes "

This ultimatum having been delivered, Lady Ogilvie would choke down her emotion as best she could, and declare that she had endeavoured to do her best during her wedded life to ensure her husband's happiness.

Perhaps, however, it was in her dealings with her nephew that Miss Priscilla's genius was particularly apparent. It was her invariable practice to have him brought to her presence a quarter of an hour or so after her arrival at the Hall. He would then be ordered to stand before her, not too close, and not too far away, to take his hands out of his pockets, also to hold up his head and look like a gentleman. Later he must turn his head to the right in order that she might see his profile and reassure herself as to the fact that he did bear some faint resemblance to the portrait of a certain Ambrose Ogilvie—who had lost his head, that is to say mentally—before going out with Monmouth, only to lose it physically some months later on Tower Green for having gone. This important point having been settled to her satisfaction or otherwise, with some candid criti-

cisms thrown in, she would abruptly change the conversation and put to him some extraordinary questions concerning Biblical History. Nine times out of ten Maurice's answers would be as wide of the mark as are the two Poles from each other, and then the criticisms would recommence. Mental arithmetic would follow, and upon his failing to inform her as to what would be the result of his dealings if he were given one pound seven shillings and sixpence halfpenny wherewith to purchase three yards of sarsanet ribbon at one price, three yards of calico at another, with sundry other little commodities thrown in, she would declare that she had always-known him to be a fool, and would dismiss the miserable little urchin from the room, his ears tingling and his eyes overflowing. Sometimes on these occasions, Sir Petre would unbend, probably because he had been catching it himself, and as a result could feel a certain amount of sympathy for his luckless offspring.

"Heart up, my boy," he said on one occasion; "you must try to please your aunt. Remember she has twenty thousand pounds of her own, and it may go into your pocket. Please God," he added, though I fear he was

not very sincere in his good wish, "she'll live to be a hundred, but if she don't you'll find the sum come in more than handy when I'm gone"

As a matter of fact, to go rather far ahead, she died sooner than was expected, and, possibly on account of Maurice's inability to satisfy her as to his commercial ability in the matter of spending money, all that fell to his share was the sum of five hundred pounds. He, being a typical Ogilvie, invested two hundred pounds of the amount in a hunter of superlative excellence, a hundred he lent to a friend, while the balance helped to see him through a London season. But I am travelling too fast, and must now hark back to my story

It was not until it was discovered that Maurice was getting out of the hands of his tutor (an amiable young man, who feared his employer as he did the d——) that his mother realized that he needed firmer handling. He was accordingly packed off to Eton, from which venerable seat of learning he emerged after a career that could not be said to have been either brilliant or obscure, but which hovered midway between. In the playing fields he had made his mark, and a

very good mark it was. The report from the scholastic side, however, was scarcely so favourable. But as he himself philosophically observed to his housemaster, when the latter bade him good-bye, "I don't suppose I shall have to work for my living, so as I can read and write, and know what people mean when they talk about the Pons Asinorum, I expect I shall manage to rub along."

It should also be recorded that he was extremely popular with everyone, from the Dean down to the boy who cleaned his boots, and this in itself says a good deal for the youth's character.

From Eton he, in due course, went on to Oxford, leaving that University as he had done Eton, without overtaxing his brain, a general favourite, and with as fine a collection of debts as the most exacting parent could desire to have the paying of. The Squire's language when this was brought to his knowledge was worthy of his best endeavours. Had Miss Priscilla been present it is my belief she would have fallen upon the floor and have expired upon the spot. Fortunately, however, she was not. Sir Petre stormed and raved, vowed that he would not pay a halfpenny of the amount, deliberately accused

his son of attempting to ruin him, threatened to disinherit him, and endeavoured to show in every possible way that, although he was what is called getting on in life, he still possessed more than his fair share of vitality. Next day he recovered, and, when his wife condoled with him, he bade her mind her own business, and declared that, after all, he was just such another young dog in his day, thus inferring that he envied his son the power of spending money rather than otherwise. A month later, several writs having made their appearance, the debts were paid, and then it was, I can only suppose in a feeling of gratitude, that Maurice committed the most foolish action of his life. The assurance of the family lawyer told him that the estate was involved, and, as things were at present going, beyond all hope of redemption. The only way to set it upon its feet again, it would appear, was to cut the entail. This, of course, could only be done with Maurice's consent.

"Cut it, or do whatever you like with it," said that affable youth, who was anxious to be off to town, and who was not in the habit of looking into the future. "If you say it's all right, I am quite content to take your word

for it. Do what you can for the poor old governor, and I'll sign anything you may want me to."

The horrified lawyer hastened to put the case before him in its most serious aspect. Maurice, however, saw no reason to alter his decision.

"I'm not much of a hand at business," he answered. "If it were a horse or a dog I might be of some use—but all this dry-as-dust red-tape business is beyond me. It seems, however, as if the case is clear. The estate is in a hopeless condition; money must be found at any cost. There appears to be nothing, from what I understand you to say, to raise it on, but the entail. You say that can't be cut without my consent. I give that consent, so what more do you want? The only thing left now is to raise the money, isn't it?"

"I should like to see you take the matter a little more seriously, Mr. Maurice," replied the worthy old man, shaking his head. "You must remember that it is a very vital matter to you at the present, and likely to be still more so in the future. With all due respect to your father, I must remind you that as this estate has been in the past, and

is at present, maintained, it runs through a good deal of money Sir Petre is scarcely likely at his time of life to consent to any change, and for this reason the amount we are about to raise may go the same road as so much of it has gone before In that case I presume you understand what your position will be ? ”

“ I suppose I shall lose the estate ? Is that so ? ”

“ I am afraid it is,” answered the lawyer. “ It would be a thousand pities.”

“ Is there no alternative ? ” Maurice enquired, with what was for the first time a serious face.

“ None, unless your father would consent to let it, and go elsewhere in order to economize That is the only remedy I can see ”

“ He would never do that,” Maurice replied. “ And I should not like to be the man who asked him to do it. He’d never consent to let any one else live here. Besides, I’m not sure that I should care about it myself. We’ve not gone in for that sort of thing, you know.”

The old lawyer heaved a heavy sigh. He and his ancestors had acted as family lawyers for generations, and it cut him to the quick to see the ruin that was impending, and to

know that nothing could be done to avert it. He was only too well aware that whatever sum might be raised, when the entail should be cut, would only be utilized to keep up the present extravagant mode of living. Sixteen idle horses would eat their handsome heads off in the stables, six lusty, overfed grooms would loaf about the stable yard; four footmen, under the command of an apoplectic butler, and a bishop-like groom of the chambers, would decorate the Hall, and in the intervals make love to a battalion of housemaids; while the old oaks, that had seen the most luckless of all Stuarts in his pride, would be called upon to pay the penalty. It seemed a thousand pities—but there, such things go on around us every day, and yet the callous world wags on much as it did before.

Having given the lawyer a free hand, Maurice thought no more about the matter, save when he was called upon to sign the various documents that were put before him. The old baronet's face brightened as matters seemed to improve, and for the next three years life at Ogilvie Hall went on very much as it had done before. Maurice was then a tall, good-looking young man, of five-and-

twenty, with the typical Ogilvie face, blue eyes, a small fair moustache, and hair that, do what he would, would insist upon having a wave in it. For miles around the Hall he was a recognized authority on all matters connected with sport, was an undeniably fine shot, as good a rider as his father had been before him, and, as every one admitted, one of the most popular young men in the country side. So far, he was able, with truth, to declare himself heart whole, but how long he was likely to remain so, was impossible to say. Mothers by the score had endeavoured to entrap him, but without success. He was happy enough as he was, and he had the best of reasons for knowing that if he married at all it must be to a girl with money. So far he had not met one who came up to his standard. He was a very difficult young gentleman to please, and, as I have said, up to the present the fair sex had found no place in the scheme of his life as he had worked it out. That was to come later when it would be with a violence that would shake him to the very centre of his being. But more of that hereafter.

Whatever else he may be able to remember, Maurice is little likely to forget his twenty-

sixth birthday. For the week previous to it he had been in London, doing the theatres, and selecting a new hunter that was to be as wonderful a specimen of his kind as could be found in the Metropolis. Knowing, however, that his mother would be disappointed, if he did not spend his birthday at home, he returned to the Hall on the day preceding that important event.

As his dogcart sped swiftly up the drive, he looked at the old house, and, though as a rule he was not given to the display of much emotion, he felt a sudden thrill of pride and affection as he regarded it. As the lawyer had said some years before, it would be a thousand pities if such a noble place, boasting such historic traditions, should pass out of the family into the hands of others, whose only association with it would be that of purchase.

In the porch stood his mother waiting to greet him, a grey-haired, sweet-faced woman, who, when he stood beside her, threw her arms round his neck, and kissed him, with tears of pride in her eyes. A moment later his father appeared, and gave him a hearty welcome home.

The Squire had been hunting all day and

declared himself tired. Throughout dinner he was unusually silent, and afterwards went early to bed to prepare for the festivities of the morrow.

"I don't know what ails your father, Maurice," said Lady Ogilvie to her son, as they sat together before the fire in a room that was known as the Blue Drawing Room. "He does not seem at all well, and though he declares that he is only tired, I cannot help feeling that he is not at all his usual self. If he does not seem better to-morrow morning, I shall send for Doctor Wilson, and ask him to persuade him to abstain from hunting."

"And the Governor will refuse to see him," Maurice replied "Of that you may be sure"

Lady Ogilvie heaved a heavy sigh. She was aware of her husband's obstinacy, also his distaste for medicines, and of his proud boast that he had only been in the doctor's hands thrice in his life: once at his birth, once for a juvenile complaint, and again after an accident received in the hunting field, and which would have killed most men

The medical assistance mentioned was not needed, however, for next morning the old baronet was quite his usual self. He declared

that he had never felt better in his life, and that he would break the neck of the dear old doctor, if he dared to present himself in the Hall, save in the capacity of a hunting guest. When the worthy medico, mounted on his famous grey, did put in an appearance (the meet was at the Hall in honour of the heir's birthday) he was informed of the threat, and laughingly replied to the effect that, when the baronet *did* fall into his hands, it would be a bad day for him. Alas! how little did he guess the awful truth contained in this speech.

Of all the meets of the Ogilvie hounds, that which took place each year at the Hall on Maurice's birthday was certainly the most popular. The coverts never failed to provide sport, while the welcome was as warm as the heart of man could desire.

Punctual to the moment the master and hounds made their appearance, Maurice riding beside his father. A move was then made to what was known as the Gallows Copse—a famous draw—though why it should have received such a gruesome title no one had ever been in a position to say. On reaching it the Squire and hounds disappeared, while the field prepared themselves for the

break away, that they felt would not be long delayed. As it was soon proved, they were not destined to be disappointed, for in less than five minutes the second whip was to be observed holding his whip in the air, thus signifying that Charley had taken his departure from his retreat. A few seconds later the hounds broke cover, the master, riding with all the dash of a young man, close at their heels. Across the park they sped, and into the open country beyond, by way of the Home Farm. Master Reynard knew his ground as well as those behind him, and as the second whip observed to Maurice, "he's making for Lower Ashby, sir, for a million pound!" Now Lower Ashby is fifteen good miles, as the crow flies from the Hall, if it is one, and as stiff a bit of country as is to be found in the radius of the Ogilvie Hunt.

In due course they left Little Popston behind them, and having crossed Saxley Brook, where many came to grief, skirted Eversdon village (here their quarry was put somewhat off his line by a sheepdog, who appeared anxious to join in the chase), and then turned to the left up the vale, where the jumping is sufficiently good to satisfy the most insatiable and reckless of Nimrods.

About this time Maurice began to experience an uneasy feeling that his horse was not going as strong as he should be ; more than once he had shown palpable signs of failing strength. The pace so far had been tremendous, and there did not seem to be any sign of a check. They were crossing a twenty acre field at the time, and before them was a hedge and fence combined that, as Maurice knew from experience, would take a deal of negotiating. To attempt it on a worn out horse was to court disaster, nevertheless he hardened his heart and rode at it. The result was what might have been expected. Poor old Benbow, conscious of his reputation, and game to the last, rose at it but not high enough, took it full and fair on his chest, turned a somersault, and finally landed in the ditch on the further side, with Maurice half under him.

" Well, this is a pretty business," observed that young gentleman, as he staggered to his feet. " Benbow's done for, and goodness only knows where my second horse is. Miles away, probably."

After a short rest the animal managed, with some assistance from his master, to stagger to his feet. It was only then that

Maurice made the far from pleasant discovery that he was dead lame. The hunt by this time was out of sight, and not another soul was to be seen in the length and breadth of the landscape.

"Well, I suppose there is nothing for it but to lead the old rascal home," said Maurice disconsolately, when he had convinced himself of the extent of the damage. "It's no end of a nuisance, however."

A ten mile walk, leading a lame horse, and with the knowledge ever with you that you have missed the best run of the season, is far from being the most pleasant form of experience. When, however, it has to be performed, as in Maurice's case, in hunting boots, its misery is increased a hundredfold. However, nothing was to be gained by crying over what could not be helped, so he steeled his heart to the task and set off. Leaving the field in which he had met his disaster, he followed a bridle-path towards a gate that he knew would bring him to the high road. When he reached this he paused to examine his horse once more. The poor beast was so lame by this time that he could scarcely hobble.

"I shall never get him home at this pace,"

sighed Maurice. "He could not manage much more than a mile an hour. Heigho! There's nothing for it, I suppose, but to endeavour to reach the *Rose and Crown* at Little Pettridge, and to leave him there until he can be sent for later."

With this intention he trudged slowly on until he arrived at the little roadside inn. He led his horse to the stables behind the house, and bade the old ostler, who had been a well known whip in his day, give proper attention to the animal's wants. After that he made his way into the inn itself, and called for refreshment, of which, by this time, he stood much in need.

He had scarcely raised the mug to his lips ere the sound of a horse galloping at a great speed greeted his ears. Accompanied by the landlord he hastened to the door to discover that the horseman was the vicar of the parish which adjoined the Hall—a fox hunting parson of the old school, who, while doing his duty by his parishioners, seldom missed a hunting day. On this particular occasion there was an expression upon his face that Maurice had never seen there before. It was as white as the paper upon which I am now writing. On seeing Maurice, he brought his

foam flecked horse to a standstill, and made as if he were about to speak. For the moment, however, no words passed his lips. His tongue appeared to refuse to perform its duty. At last, however, he found his voice.

"I have been looking for you everywhere," he stammered, and then stopped again, as if he were not quite certain how he should continue.

"I am sorry you should have had so much trouble," Maurice replied; "but since you *have* found me, may I ask the reason of your search?"

"Then you have not heard the terrible news?" the other replied. "But there, I can see you have not. My poor lad, how am I to tell you? You must nerve yourself for a terrible shock."

The smile that had hitherto illumined Maurice's face faded suddenly away.

"You have bad news for me?" he cried
"I can see that. For Heaven's sake tell me what it is! Has an accident happened to my father?"

"I am deeply grieved to be compelled to say that a terrible accident has indeed befallen him. His horse put his foot in a hole

and came down with him, throwing him heavily."

"And the result?" Maurice inquired, his face now as white as that of the man before him. "Speak, sir, for pity's sake, and let me know the worst. Is he seriously injured?"

"He is more than that! He is dead! My poor lad, I know this is a terrible blow to you, and this is not a time for me to say anything to comfort you. What we have to think of is, what will be the best way to break the sad intelligence to your mother!"

"Poor mother! It will kill her," muttered Maurice, speaking more to himself than to the man before him. "It must be my work to go on and tell her. In the meantime he must be brought home. God help us, this is the saddest day of my life."

"Believe me, Maurice," replied the old vicar, "I am more than sorry for you, and deeply grieved. I have known your father for so many years. Now you must go on and tell your mother what has happened. The news will come best from you. The rest of the arrangements you can leave in my hands, with the assurance that everything possible shall be done to spare you and yours additional pain."

He held out his hand to Maurice, who took it and thanked him for his kindness. The worthy old parson was too much affected to say anything further, but turning his horse, he set off at a smart trot in the direction whence he had come. Maurice, scarcely conscious of his actions, watched him ride off, and then returned into the inn, in order to arrange for a conveyance to carry him to his home.

It was indeed with a heavy heart that he drove up to the house which had that morning been the scene of such life and gaiety, and which was now to be plunged into the depths of the greatest sorrow. As he alighted at the front door his mother approached from a different direction. She seemed confused as well as alarmed at seeing him return on wheels, and, with all a mother's solicitude, hastened towards him, as if with the intention of ascertaining the extent of any injuries he might have received.

"No, I'm not in the least hurt," he replied in answer to her inquiries. "It is true old Benbow put me down, and lamed himself. As he was too bad to travel I left him at the *Rose and Crown*, and got Burston to drive me home in his gig. Come into the house,

mother, I have something serious to say to you."

Side by side mother and son entered the stately hall. Instinctively Lady Ogilvie realized that there was something terribly wrong. More than once she looked up into her son's face, as if in the hopes of being able to read his secret there, but beyond its pallor and the firm setting of the lips, it told her nothing. At last they reached her own boudoir—the room in which the two had exchanged so many confidences, and which was destined now to hear a tale that was to crush the life out of the tender woman, who, despite his many idiosyncracies, had loved her husband with an affection that time had only served to strengthen. As to what transpired at that interview I can say nothing. It is a subject too sacred for my pen. When it was all told they waited, hand in hand, for the arrival of the dead. And, as Maurice reflected, this was the end of his birthday—the last—though he did not know it then, that he was to spend in his old home.

Five days later Sir Petre was laid to rest with his ancestors, and on the morning following, with the winter sun streaming in through the study window, his heir learnt his fate.

From what the lawyer told him he was able to see that there was nothing for it—but that the old house should be sacrificed. Despite the cutting of the entail, by which the last large sum had been obtained, Sir Petre had further managed to involve himself in what could only be truly described as a new and marvellous set of difficulties. The most outrageous and transparently dishonest company promoters had succeeded in inveigling him into their clutches, to an extent that nearly drove the little lawyer to the verge of despair.

“If only Sir Petre had told me,” he wailed, “I might have been able to save him. As it is we are well nigh helpless. To think that by such miserable folly the place that I have loved and served so long, should be brought under the hammer. And that these sharks, for sharks they can only be called” (here he brought his fist down savagely upon a pile of deeds lying upon the table) “should have bled him in this fashion. Sir Maurice, I fear that this will prove a bad business for her ladyship and yourself.”

“Never mind me,” replied the young man. “So long as you can settle it all right for the mother, I’ve no doubt I shall be able to shift

for myself. The question is, can you do that ? ”

“ I fancy you can make your mind easy on that score,” answered the other. “ But it will be necessary for us to use all our ingenuity to make the residue sufficient for the purpose.”

As it turned out, Fortune favoured them more than they had expected she would do. Immediately it became known that the property was on the market, a wealthy American stepped forward, and made an offer for it as it stood. This offer, after careful consideration, was accepted with certain reservations, and in due course, on a cold and cheerless day in March, Lady Ogilvie and her son passed out through the park gates, never to re-enter them again. The glories of Ogilvie Hall were to be exchanged for the advantages of a somewhat sombre house in the neighbourhood of Cadogan Square. But alas, it was not to be for long. Though for her son's sake Lady Ogilvie had tried her best to appear cheerful, she was not able to do so. Her love for the dead man had been more deeply rooted than she supposed, and her grief was in secret, eating out her life. Owing to being constantly with her Maurice did not notice this,

but those who did not see her so often, observed that she was growing thinner and weaker day by day. At last she could bear up no longer; the medical man was called in, a visit to the South of France was ordered, and Maurice carried her off to sunny Nice with all despatch. But the change was of no avail; the poor lady had no desire left for life. Little by little she drooped and faded away, until she became a mere shadow of her former self. Maurice, realizing that he was about to lose her, tended her devotedly, giving up all his time to her, and grudging no labour that could in the least degree promote her comfort or her happiness. Then the end came, and the gentle soul, whose life had surely been without blame, if ever that could be said of any human being, went back to the God who gave it, just as the *Angelus* was reminding the world of the departure of another day.

After his mother's funeral, which took place at the town in which she had died, Maurice, who felt his loss keenly, went on into Italy, and finally took ship for India, not returning to England for upwards of a year.

When he did he settled himself down to

London life. Upon his mother's death he had come into what remained of the Ogilvie estate, and being an extremely optimistic young man, who liked to enjoy himself to the top of his bent, without counting the consequences, arrived at the conclusion that fifteen thousand pounds would last for ever. As a matter of fact it held out for less than two years. Tradesmen appropriated a small portion of it—not nearly so much as they would have liked—polo ponies gobbled up another large slice, while half a hundred other rapacious folk, who, like the daughters of the horse-leech, cried continually, “give—give—give,” made themselves responsible for the remainder.

At last the situation became serious, and the young man found himself in as pretty a fix as any one could desire to be in. It was as plain as the nose on his face that the money must be found to carry on affairs, and at once, but how and where was this wonder to be accomplished. He had no desire to give up his vastly pleasant life in London, but without a banking account—and moreover a substantial one—how was that catastrophe to be averted. One evening he took to himself a happy-go-lucky young Guardsman, and,

over a long whisky and soda and a still longer cigar, appealed to him for advice

"Do as I did, dear boy," replied that affable youth, "hunt up an heiress and marry her out of hand. There's nothing like it, believe me."

Maurice made a wry face.

"Is there no other way?"

"Devil a one, so far as I can see. Some fellows sponge on their friends—you couldn't do that. Others rub along on wine commissions—that wouldn't suit you either. There's the stage, but, forgive my candour, you can't act. No, dear boy, an heiress is what you want, and what you must have. Bless your heart, you must fall in love with her after you're married, as I did. Take my word, it's pleasant to know that quarter days have no terrors, and that your name no longer figures in the ledgers of Messrs. Samuel Aarons and Son, or Mr. Abraham Levy. Here's to the heiress, Maurice!"

He drank the toast with great satisfaction to himself, and then went off to pick up his wife at a Foreign Office reception.

A month later, the engagement of Sir Maurice Ogilvie, baronet, to Miss Mabel Gardiner, daughter of William Gardiner, of

blackening fame, was announced. She was a very pretty girl, and Maurice felt that it was highly probable that he should end, as his friend had done, by falling in love with his wife.

CHAPTER II

MOST people thought that the Ogilvie-Gardiner engagement was a desirable one in every way. Maurice Ogilvie was a baronet, the last of a long race; young, good-looking, and as, the saying goes, without a penny wherewith to bless himself. On the other hand, his *fiancée*, Miss Mabel Gardiner, was the only daughter of Millionaire Gardiner, who had made his fortune by means of a patent blacking, that, some people said, was as worthless as it was inexpensive. The girl was just twenty, pretty in an unpretentious way, and by no means as socially ambitious as were her father and mother. As soon as the engagement was announced old Gardiner informed the Press that it was his intention to present the happy pair with a hundred thousand pounds on their wedding day. Whereupon Society, who very naturally hoped in an indirect way to participate in the good things that would follow the distribution of

such a sum, said : " How delightful, and how *very* good of Mr. Gardiner. The girl herself, however, was not the least in love with her future husband. Though he did not know it, and would not have troubled himself very much about it even if he had, she was breaking her heart for love of a somewhat austere cousin in the North of England. Maurice Ogilvie had no particular desire to marry, yet he knew he must do something to remedy his fortunes. He was heavily in debt, and it seemed to him that if he had to get money the easiest way of obtaining it would be by marrying an heiress.

" I suppose when we're married we shall manage to shake down somehow," he said to himself, on one of the few occasions that he gave the matter serious consideration. " To my mind, Matrimony is like putting a pair of strange horses together in double harness. At first they run a bit wild—one hugs the pole, and the other gets as far away from it as possible. They don't understand each other's paces, and when you set them going there is every prospect of a smash. Then, little by little, they fall into each other's ways, forget past differences, and go ahead as if they'd been running together all their lives "

It was not an intellectual way of looking at the matter, yet it showed some knowledge of the world

Affairs having been satisfactorily arranged, Maurice purchased a handsome diamond ring, and, having discovered a fitting occasion, placed it on the third finger of Miss Gardiner's left hand. So far as he was able to see, that was all the present required of him. Love-making he did not believe in! At least, not in that particular quarter.

On the second day after his engagement was made public property, when he returned to his chambers after luncheon, he discovered a note upon the hall table.

"Ah," he said, as he picked it up, "I thought as much. Now, if I'm not mistaken, the fat will be in the fire. I wonder how she will take the news? In all probability she'll turn nasty, and there will be a breach of promise case. I wonder what old Gardiner would say to that?"

Opening the envelope he withdrew the contents and perused them.

"My dear Maurice," the letter ran, "I saw some nonsense in the paper this morning about your being engaged to a Miss Gardiner! What rot these newspapers *do* get hold of!

They'll be saying that I'm going to be married to a Duke, or something of that sort, next. How would you like that, my boy? Though I didn't believe it, I don't mind saying that that paragraph has given me a bit of a turn. Send me a line to say there's nothing in it, there's a good boy. When are you coming to see me? I haven't set eyes on you for days.—Ever your loving CONNIE."

Miss Constance Amelia Burt, better known to the music-hall world as Connie Plantagenet, the famous serio, had had the good luck, or misfortune, as you may consider it, to attract the young man's attention some few months after his return to England. It was one of his chief regrets in life that, on one occasion, he had been decoyed into writing her a certain letter, the contents of which he could not for the life of him remember, and which she had ever since obstinately refused to divulge.

"If there's going to be a smash," he observed, "it will be that letter that will bring it about. Confound it, I wish I could remember what I said in it."

After which he expressed a desire that the whole matter might soon be settled and done with. He knew very well that if ever it came

into Court, it would cause a stir such as London had not known for many a long year

That afternoon, between four and five, he mounted his hack and rode leisurely down to the Park. You must understand that he was a handsome fellow, and also a general favourite. Many a pretty face looked up at him in mute approval as he walked his horse quietly down the Row, and more than once he was obliged to pull his animal up to receive the congratulations of his friends upon his two days' old engagement.

"So you're hooked at last, Maurice, my boy," said the young Lord Laithbridge, who had just been declared Bankrupt, and who had won the reputation of being one of the most desperate gamblers in London. "And to some purpose, too! 'Gad! I wish somebody would hunt up an heiress for me. I've half a mind to go across to the States this autumn to have a look round. The worst of it is, I am only a miserable Viscount. Now, if I were a Duke, I might be worth half a million. However, even a hundred thousand would come in handy just now."

Maurice made some jesting answer, and then proceeded on his way once more. Near

the Powder Magazine he came upon Miss Gardiner, mounted on a handsome bay and escorted by a younger brother.

"Good afternoon," she said, a little timidly, as he rode up and bowed to her. "Are you aware that you are a quarter of an hour late?"

"I am exceedingly sorry," he answered. "I must apologize most humbly. I had no idea of it. So many people have stopped me in the Row to congratulate me upon our engagement, that I began to think I should never get here at all."

She did not answer. Her face was a little pale, and she looked down at the handle of her hunting crop as if she were anxious not to meet his eye. She was thinking of a certain despairing letter she had that day received, and which was now lying concealed near her heart, and of the author of it, who was a hard-working and struggling solicitor in a North country town.

"Oh, why," she asked herself, "had she not the courage to take her fate in her hands and tell Maurice everything? He was a gentleman, and surely he would release her when he knew that she did not care for him, and that her heart was given to another? The shame of this loveless union was with

her day and night. She was quite aware that he was only marrying her for the hundred thousand pounds her father was prepared to pay down on the wedding day.

"You are very quiet this afternoon," said Maurice, as they turned the corner. "I hope you are not unhappy? What do you say to a canter?"

She willingly acquiesced, and away they went. The spectators at the rails admired Maurice's easy seat, and the manner in which he managed his horse. Many of those who knew him doubtless envied him his good fortune.

"They appear to be as happy a young couple as one would wish to find," said General Winterhale, an ancient warrior, who prided himself upon his knowledge of human nature, and who was wont to declare that he could see further through a brick wall than his neighbours. "Now I wonder if Master Maurice has given her a history of the last ten years of his life? I should say not! To my mind, it's better to postpone such explanations until after marriage—particularly when there's a hundred thousand pounds trembling in the balance."

The cynical old *roué* shook his head know-

ingly, and went forward to greet the Dowager Lady Porchester, who knew as much of life as he did, and, very possibly, a good deal more. They seated themselves in a shady spot, and for upwards of half an hour amused each other by picking their friends to pieces, and in sowing the seeds of discord as thickly as two evilly-disposed people could do it.

In the meantime the young couple had continued their ride in the direction of the Corner. Young Gardiner, who had probably been previously instructed by his mother, made a point of riding at a discreet distance behind the others. He had boasted that morning to certain juvenile friends that Sir Maurice Ogilvie was going to marry his sister, who would then be Lady Ogilvie, for which reason for the future he should be very careful with whom he associated.

That evening Maurice dined at Gardiner's house in Queen's Gate. He was to be introduced to the family, or, in other words, to be paraded before the envious gaze of a certain cousin and his wife, the proprietor and proprietress of a large hosiery business in the Midlands, an elderly sister of Mrs. Gardiner's, who hailed from a mysterious region, which she described as 'Olloway ; another married

sister whose husband had retired from business, as she found occasion to tell Maurice, "on a competence," and a worthy old gentleman with a very red face and white hair, who drank everything that was poured out for him, and addressed the ladies, one and all, as "my dear" before the sweets appeared.

Ogilvie did his best to make himself agreeable, and in a measure succeeded. Before his arrival the assembled company, you may be sure, had been informed that he was a descendant of one of the oldest families in England, "and not only that, but on intimate terms with Royalty, my dear." At dessert Mr Gardiner rose, and, having drawn down his waistcoat, pulled up his collar and mopped his forehead with his dinner napkin, proposed the health of the happy couple in a speech that was, to say the least of it, liberal in praise of the bridegroom elect.

"Good Heavens!" said Ogilvie to himself, as he suddenly realized what lay before him. "Surely they don't expect me to make a speech?"

It was evident that the assembled company did expect it, particularly the old gentleman with the red face, who, not having caught the gist of his host's remarks, assured Ogilvie

that if he would only stand for his Division, he would give him the promise of his vote whatever the Neighbourhood might have to say to it. Ten minutes later, and considerably to his disgust, Maurice found himself on his feet, thanking his future father-in-law for the kind expressions he had used towards him, and for the most generous way in which he had been received that evening by the Gardiner family. While he was speaking his betrothed kept her eyes riveted on the pattern of her plate. They were filled with tears, for her thoughts were with the other man, at that moment eating his heart out for love of her. What a hard world hers seemed to be that evening, and how unjust!

When she went to bed she did as she had done on the two previous nights, that is to say, she cried herself to sleep. How totally unlike are various people's natures. Her father's one desire was that she should make a brilliant match. He did not care what amount he spent on bringing this result about. She, however, had no ambition to shine in Society, no desire to reach that dazzling pinnacle which means invitations to a Government Minister's reception, or to a Country

House, where one may be the fellow-guest of Royalty. She would far rather have retired to a quiet town in the North, where the highest form of gaiety is a subscription dance, and the greatest honour an invitation to a Bishop's, or a Rural Dean's Garden Party. In her heart of hearts she knew, as well as any one could have told her, that Ogilvie, although he was too well bred to say so, thought her father and mother vulgar people, and that, had it not been for the money she was to bring him, he would not have looked twice at herself. She had heard her people discuss him times out of number, and knew the gusto with which they looked forward to the prominence her alliance with him would give them in the Social World.

"Why are papa and mamma so anxious to know these people?" she asked herself, and then continued. "When we were in the old home every one respected papa because he was a clever and an honest man, who had fought his way up from poverty to wealth. Now he is in a false position, and people laugh at him for the airs he gives himself."

After the dinner at Queen's Gate, just described, a week went by and the engagement,

from being a nine days' wonder, was now well-nigh forgotten. Upon Maurice Ogilvie the chains of love sat lightly. He made a point of calling at his *fiancée's* once a day, as in duty bound, met her in the Park in the afternoon, and twice in one week was her companion at the theatre. What more could be expected of him? He had invited old Mr. Gardiner to dine with him at his club on one occasion, and the latter had talked about the men he had met there for several days afterwards. In the near future he hoped to be able to induce his son-in-law to get him elected a member of that same club.

"Then, by Jove!" he said to his wife in the sanctity of their chamber, "there's no knowing who we may be able to get to dine with us. Keep your heart up, Jane, old lady. We're on the right road now, and if only we play our cards carefully and stand in with Ogilvie, we'll be among the best of the swells yet!"

His good wife, however, shook her head. She was not so sanguine. Her woman's instinct told her that matters were not exactly as they should be with the young couple.

The London Season was fast drawing to its close. Goodwood was only a short time ahead

and already hostesses were making their lists for the autumn house parties. Gardiner had purchased a large estate in the Midlands, and was anxious to fill his house with fashionables. In this he felt that his future son-in-law would help him.

It was arranged that the wedding should take place in the first week in October. Maurice, however, did not seem at all elated by the prospect.

"Hang it all, man!" said young George Pergraves at a club one day. "To look at you one would imagine that you took no sort of interest in the coming event. I can't make some of you fellows out. You get engaged and then you get the blues. Why, when poor little Dickie Wentworth was turned off last week things were just about as dismal as could be. The church, with the exception of the father and mother, half a dozen relations, of course on the Bride's side, two or three old family servants, and the Bride and Bridegroom, was empty. I was there, as a matter of fact, and officiated as best man. I can tell you, however, that it weighed on my spirits like lead. Dickie is one hundred and fifty thousand pounds the richer by the transaction, but his family

have cut him ever since. For my part, I call it a shame."

These were just the sort of discussions that Maurice abominated, and yet he knew that he was powerless to resent them. There could be no sort of doubt about the fact that he was marrying for money, and that every one in his world knew it. Yet, while he was quite aware of it himself, it was not pleasant to think that everybody else knew it also.

With the pretty Connie Plantagenet he had had by this time a series of quarrels. She declared herself convinced that he was throwing her over.

"For two pins she'd make herself nasty," said Ogilvie to himself, when he emerged from one particularly unpleasant interview. "This is the result of listening to people when they vow they have no idea in life save to promote another's happiness. A nice fix I shall be in if she starts proceedings for Breach of Promise against me, and, dash it all, there are many more unlikely things than that."

As the wedding day came nearer, Mr. Gardiner became more and more generous. He could not do enough, so it appeared, to

show his satisfaction at having gained such a popular son-in-law as Sir Maurice Ogilvie. He had made inquiries with regard to the Ogilvie estates, and had announced his intention, in confidence, of repurchasing them should such a thing be possible

"Before I've done," he observed, "you shall sit in the seats of your forefathers. My daughter shall be beside you. All I'll ask then shall be that you have a son to follow you "

Maurice smiled

"In that case," he said, "I hope he will be a better man than his father "

"My dear sir," the old gentleman returned, "you really must not talk like that. Somebody might believe you. Why, I've looked the Ogilvies' pedigree up, and I find that they are one of the oldest families in the three Kingdoms. It has always been my saying, sir, that in the long run blood will tell. Now, you've got the pedigree and I've got the money. Mark my words, we'll make history yet "

Maurice did not understand to what he alluded, but it was certain that Mr. Gardiner knew and, what was more, was well contented with himself.

It was arranged that Maurice and his wife should spend their honeymoon in the South of France, at a villa Gardiner had rented for them, and afterwards go on to Cairo and up the Nile to Assouan, returning to England in the spring. Already descriptions of the dresses being prepared for the bride were creeping into the Society papers, through some mysterious sources, though every one appeared to deplore and despise the treachery that resulted in such a breach of faith.

"It will be a *trousseau* worthy of a princess," said Mrs. Gardiner in confidence to a friend, "and I shan't mind who comes to see it. When *I* was married my mother gave me ten pounds and Aunt Thirzah five; that was all I had. My girl's outfit has already cost fifteen hundred, and it's my opinion it will run to five hundred more before it's complete."

As the eventful day approached the spirits of the bride-elect sank lower and lower. Who was to know that there had been a secret meeting in the Park, and that, on a certain wet morning, under the shelter of a dripping umbrella, a pair of young people, who deemed themselves the most unhappy couple in the world, had sworn an oath that was destined

in the near future to considerably upset certain people's calculations? When the young lady herself returned to her room an hour and a half later her eyes shone with an unusual brightness, her cheeks were flushed and there was an air about her that her mother did not at all understand

"I can't think what can have come over the girl," she remarked to her sister. "This morning, at breakfast, she looked as if she was going to cry every minute. She didn't take a bit of interest in Madame Celestine's trying on of the new tea-gown, and yet, here she is now, after a morning's walk in the Park, as happy as if she had never known a bit of trouble in her life "

It was as well that Mrs. Gardiner did not know the real cause of the sudden change in her daughter's manner; had she done so she would certainly have informed her better half, and then there would have been trouble for everybody concerned

As for Maurice Ogilvie, that happy-go-lucky young gentleman regarded the Future with an assured eye. One hundred thousand pounds even at three per cent. would realize three thousand pounds a year, in addition to which his wife was to have an allowance

of one thousand pounds per annum for pin money. It might well be said that his lot had fallen in pleasant places. One day he paid a visit, accompanied by his father-in-law, to his new home, and found it a model of completeness and comfort. The hunting, shooting and fishing were undeniable, while it was sufficiently near London to permit of his running up whenever he might care to do so.

At last it only wanted three weeks to the eventful day. The banns had already been published once in the two parishes. The invitations for the ceremony and the reception that was to follow it were issued, and wedding presents were arriving by every post. The house in Queen's Gate was in a continual simmer of excitement. Mere male creatures found themselves of no account, while dressmakers and costumiers reigned supreme. Old Gardiner realized this, and spent the greater part of his time at the club, to which his son-in-law had managed to get him elected.

It must be admitted here that if the world in general looked with favour upon the union of these two people, there was one individual at least in the great Metropolis who did not

regard it in the same light. This was Miss Connie Plantagenet, the famous music-hall serio, who at the time was delighting all London with a recondite song entitled, "It's Just What I Always Says to Mother!" She had at last realized that the marriage was likely to become an accomplished fact, and, as may be supposed, she was meditating vengeance.

"Just let him marry her," she had remarked more than once, "and I'll show him what I can do. He thinks that I am only bluffing, but he was never more mistaken in his life. When he's got her money there will be something to pay damages with. I'll have a good part of it. I've seen her, and she ain't half so pretty as I am. It's only because she's rich that he's so keen on marrying her. Well, we'll wait and see. He thinks he's very clever, but, though he ought to, he don't know Connie Plantagenet yet. There's dozens who would marry me if I were to hold up my little finger. But he's a real swell, and the only one I ever cared anything about."

After thus musing the young lady would then trip on to the stage and sing a song, the refrain of which was as follows :

Don't you bother about the sort of yarns he tells to you,
Treat him just as if he was your brother.

Give him jam and toffy, oh!

Cigarettes and coffee, oh!

And he'll fetch for you and carry you,

Worship you and marry you,

Least—that's just what I always says to mother.

There could be no doubt that at that moment Miss Connie Plantagenet was the rage of London. Every one went to see her, and the music of her latest song—that just described—was played upon every barrel organ, sung in drawing-rooms in Belgravia, and alleyways in Seven Dials, hummed by the Peer in his bath, by the clerk on his way to business, and whistled by the butcher boy on his rounds. The mild young curate sang it at penny readings and blushed at his temerity. The last line, "That's just what I always says to mother," became a slang expression of the street, and on several occasions had had the honour of being quoted in Police Court proceedings.

Meanwhile, there was much speculation in the clubs regarding the Ogilvie-Gardiner wedding, not so much from the Queen's Gate, as from Miss Connie Burt-Plantagenet's point of view.

“ Will she sue him, do you think ? ” asked one man of another, and as often as not the other would reply, with a knowing wink : “ Sue him ? Goodness knows. That’s just what I am asking mother ! ”

CHAPTER III

Two days before the wedding Maurice was dressing, when his letters were brought to him. Among the number were one or two invitations to dinner—several notes from tradesmen, who, having in view the altered condition of his fortunes, were now as deeply desirous of serving him as they had been impatient to receive their money before ; and last, but not least, an envelope bearing the handwriting of his *fiancée*, and a small packet also addressed by her. The scarcity of love letters that had passed between the two young people was phenomenal in many respects. Neither of them was a good correspondent, and, even had they been, they had little to write to each other about. As he had seen the writer of the letter on the previous evening, he opened the envelope with some curiosity.

“What on earth can she have to say to me ? ” he asked himself.

He was very soon to learn. Withdrawing

the letter from the envelope, he read as follows :

“DEAR MAURICE,—I cannot imagine what you will say, or think, of me when you have perused this letter./ Somehow, I do not fancy you will mind very much. It has long been clear to me that you do not love me, and that our marriage is purely one of ambition on my father’s part, and of convenience on your own. I should have been brave and have told you before that I would not marry you. Now, however, at the last moment, I have summoned up sufficient courage to act as I feel sure is best for both of us. Such a marriage as ours was to have been, could only have ended in misery. I have loved my cousin, Henry Gardiner, ever since we were children together, and I have left home to be married to him this morning. I return your ring. Try to forgive me, and forget me. You should not find this hard to do.—Believe me to be, always yours sincerely, MABEL GARDINER”

Placing the letter on his dressing-table, and slipping the packet into his waistcoat pocket, Maurice looked at himself in the glass. It was a very solemn face he saw there.

"This is a nice business!" he muttered, after he had read the letter again. "One thing, however, is quite certain: if she is gone off with the other man, my marriage is impossible, and in that case I am ruined, lock, stock, and barrel." Then, as if struck by an afterthought, he added, with a grim smile: "Poor old Gardiner, this will be no end of a blow to him."

He leisurely finished his dressing, and then went into breakfast. His meal was not destined to be a peaceful one, however, for he had scarcely commenced, before his man informed him that Mr. Gardiner had called and desired to see him at once.

"Show him in," said Maurice, and then, putting down his morning paper, he rose to receive the gentleman, who, until a few minutes before, he had taught himself to look upon as his future father-in-law.

"Good-day, Mr. Gardiner," Maurice began, holding out his hand. "This is rather an early call, is it not? What can I do for you?"

"Something is very wrong!" gasped the old gentleman, who, owing to his climb up the stairs, was very much out of breath. "I don't know how to break it to you I'm

overwhelmed with shame. If anybody had ever told me such a thing could have happened, I wouldn't have believed him. I thought that that girl of mine loved me, and that her only desire was to please me. Yet here she is running away with a miserable struggling lawyer, who has only three hundred pounds a year to bless himself with, while you—— But there, Sir Maurice, I don't know what to say to you ! ”

“ Then cut the matter short by not saying anything, my good sir,” the other replied. “ I've had a letter myself from your daughter, telling me that she prefers your nephew to your humble servant. It was a bit of a facer, I must admit ; but perhaps she was right. I'm not much of a fellow, when all's said and done ; and if she loves him better than she does me—well, I don't know that it isn't better that she should marry him ”

“ I am glad to see that you can take it so calmly,” said the other ; “ for my part, I can't. I wouldn't have believed it of her. I'll cut her out of my will. She shall never have a halfpenny of my money. I won't see either of them.”

“ Oh, yes, you will,” Maurice replied, soothingly. “ You must bear in mind the fact

that's she's your own daughter ; and it's no use crying over spilt milk. There's only one favour I would ask of you "

" What's that ? " the old gentleman inquired.

" That you won't be too hard on her when you do catch her."

" I tell you I will never see her again," Mr. Gardiner replied, vehemently. " She has done her best to break my heart and her mother's, to say nothing of making us the laughing-stock of London. Besides, look at the way in which she has treated you. It will be all over the town by midday."

" That won't trouble me. For my part, I don't care what Society says or thinks ; and if you're wise, you won't. It will be talked about at a few dinner-tables, and perhaps at some of the clubs ; after that it will be forgotten for some new sensation. I know our world and its ways."

But Mr. Gardiner was not to be easily appeased. His pride had received a bad blow, and he was still smarting under the pain of it. At the end of ten minutes he shook Maurice warmly by the hand, and said that he hoped it would make no difference in their friendship. Then he bade him good-bye and

departed. When he had seen his visitor enter his cab, the young man returned to his room and sat down to think

"Farewell to all my chances of pulling things together now," he said to himself. "Immediately this news gets about, all my duns will be down on me like a pack of hounds" Then his eyes chanced to fall on the photograph of Miss Gardiner upon the chimney-piece "My dear young lady," he continued, addressing the photograph, "you little imagine the scrape you have got me into. However, what can't be cured must be endured, and that's the long and short of it. Now I must make up my mind as to what I am going to do."

He was well aware that there was one person at least in London who would not be sorry the engagement had come to an end. That person was Miss Connie Plantagenet, who of late had been throwing out decidedly nasty hints as to what she intended doing as soon as the marriage had taken place.

"I'll go and see her this evening, and tell her all about it," said Maurice, "and at the same time inform her that it's all over with me. The question however is, what am I going to do with myself? I must get out of

England before the news becomes public property."

So saying, he consulted his morning paper. If the various advertisements were to be believed, he had a fine field open to him. The question to decide was where he should go. India he discarded at once. He had too many friends in that country. Canada had the same drawback. The United States he did not care about. Then there was South America, with Chili, Brazil and the Argentine. There was also South Africa, and lastly, Australia.

"I think Australia is the place for me," he said. "Nobody would know me there I'll drop the old name, and make a fresh start under another."

Maurice Ogilvie possessed the rare faculty of always being able to make up his mind quickly, and, having once done so, of carrying out his intentions with equal despatch. He did not waste precious time bemoaning his hard fate. He was aware that if he remained in England another twenty-four hours it might be too late to escape, and for this reason he determined to accept the inevitable and to go at once. He examined his banking account to find that there was just sufficient

to his credit to pay his servants' wages and to leave him twenty pounds. It was not a large capital on which to start life in a strange country, but, he argued, there were many men who had started with less.

"I shall have to ship before the mast," he said, "but what does that matter? My yachting experience should stand me in good stead. If I get to Liverpool to-night, it's a hundred to one I shall find a boat sailing during the next few days. I must say good-bye to Connie, however, before I go."

Shortly before nine o'clock that evening he made his way to the National Theatre of Varieties, at which well-known place of entertainment Miss Connie Plantagenet was advertised to appear punctually at 9.15. He was well known at the stage door, the attendant at which informed him that the young lady for whom he was inquiring had just gone on the stage. He accordingly passed in and made his way down the stairs, threaded several corridors, and at last found himself standing in the wings, looking upon the enormous stage on which a very pretty, but scantily-attired young lady, much decorated with diamonds, was executing a dance, remarkable more for its high-kicking than the terpsichorean-grace

it possessed. At last, very much out of breath, she danced into the wings, disappeared for a moment with her maid, to come on a few seconds later in a big sun bonnet, print frock and pinafore, with her hair hanging down her back.

"Don't go till I've had a talk with you. I shan't be many minutes," she whispered to Maurice as she passed.

He nodded, and she danced on to the stage once more. When her turn was finished, she came to him, and, having discarded the bonnet, donned a heavy cloak and led him from the theatre to her neat brougham, which was drawn up in the street outside.

"I told my maid to follow in a cab," she said. "I want to be alone with you for a little while. I've got such a heap of things to say to you "

Then they entered the brougham and drove off. She was due to appear at the Excelsior at ten o'clock to repeat her dance and song.

"Now, dear boy, let me hear all the news," she said, as she snuggled herself down. "It seems ages since last I saw you."

"I don't know that I've very much to tell you," Maurice replied, "but what little there is is fairly important. You will be

interested to hear that my engagement is broken off."

"You don't say so," cried the girl, clasping her hands together impulsively, as if she could scarcely believe she had heard aright. "Oh, Maurice, that's good news if ever there was any."

"You think so, do you?" he said, with a little laugh

"Now I shall have you all for myself," she replied, placing her hand upon his arm. "I was afraid you were going to be silly, and it made me angry. It would never have done, you know, for us to have quarrelled."

"Why not?"

"Because it would have made trouble for everybody. You surely don't think that after all this time I should let you throw me over without making trouble? If you do, you don't know Connie. But there, so long as it's all over what does it matter? How did you manage to get her to let you off?"

"She didn't let me off. She went off this morning herself. It is evident that I did not come up to her expectations. By this time she is probably married to a man who does"

"Good luck to her for her pluck. We'll drink her health later on. But I say, what

about the money the old gent was going to give you? Somebody told me he was going to hand over half a million on the wedding day. Was that true?"

"No," said Maurice. "He was going to give me a lot, but not so much as that."

"And now you don't get anything?"

"Of course not. To-night I am in the pleasant position of a man who knows himself to be ruined. I have come to-night to say good-bye to you. If I remain in England I shall have to figure in the Bankruptcy Court. As I have no ambition for that sort of thing, I'm going to drop quietly out of the running for good and all to-night."

"Maurice, you are not going to kill yourself?" cried his companion, in terror.

"No; I haven't the pluck to do that. I am just going abroad to start life afresh in a strange country. If you ever think of me, picture me digging up nuggets of gold as big as my head. I'm going to Australia."

"Oh, Maurice, Maurice, you don't mean this," Connie almost sobbed. "I cannot let you go! What makes you want to leave me? You know very well that I am making money, and that you can have as much as you like."

"No, that's out of the question," Maurice

replied. "There is nothing for it but for me to clear out. I ought to have done so a long time ago, instead of acting as I have done. Perhaps when I come back to England, tanned the colour of mahogany and with a beard down to my chest, I shall find you married, and with grown-up sons and daughters. But the girls won't be as pretty as their mother."

"You don't know how you hurt me when you talk like that, Maurice," she said. "I can't believe you are really going away."

"Really and truly," he answered, "as we used to say as children. I leave by the twelve o'clock train to-night for Liverpool. We had better say good-bye here in the carriage."

"How much money have you got?"

"Twenty pounds," he answered. "It's not very much, but I shall have to make it do."

"Maurice, you must let me give you some more. If you will come on to the Excelsior with me you shall have it. They'll advance it to me. We've been such pals, you and I, and if one pal can't help another when he's down, what's the use of being pals at all?"

Her voice shook, and Maurice, man of the

world though he was, found a lump rising in his throat. She was a kind-hearted little Bohemian, and her companion had never liked her so well as he did that night.

"I can't take your money, Connie," he answered "But I'm more than grateful to you for offering it. I wonder what the new life will be like, and if I shall run up against any of the men out there I used to know, who went to the bad in England? There was Dick Wilderton, of the Guards. He's somewhere in Australia, they say, Boundary Riding, whatever that may be. And then there's Penterton, who rode the winner of the Grand National. He's in Australia, too, but what he's doing no one knows. I suppose in the days to come folk will wonder where Maurice Ogilvie is? Then some man will ask who Ogilvie was, and another will reply: 'Why, don't you know? He was the fellow that was jilted by millionaire Gardiner's daughter the year that Connie Plantagenet was the rage.'"

"And who Connie Plantagenet wanted to help and wasn't allowed to," put in his companion "Maurice, if you'd have me I believe I'd drop the stage and go with you. You may not believe it, but I've got three

thousand pounds in my bank I'll give it to you, every penny of it, to play ducks and drakes with, if you like "

" You are a kind, generous girl," the other replied. " Too kind and generous. But what you suggest, Connie, is impossible. Enjoy your life while you can, and don't waste another thought on a worthless beggar like me. I've never done any good for myself, or for anybody else."

" If you talk like that you will make me cry," she said, " and then I'll have to put off my turn. Oh, this is the most miserable evening I have ever spent ! "

" It's all my fault," he said. " I should have written you a letter and have broken the news to you that way, instead of coming like this."

" No, no, I'm glad you came. I should never have forgiven you if you had gone away without coming to me. In what ship are you going ? "

" That's more than I can say," he replied. " When I get to Liverpool I shall look about and try to find one I'm not going as a passenger, you know."

" As what, then ? "

" I shall ship before the mast," he replied.

"That is to say, I'm going as a sailor. So you see my new life will, in all probability, begin to-night."

By this time they were more than half-way to her destination. As Maurice did not intend going as far as the theatre with her it was time for him to be leaving her.

"I'm afraid I shall have to leave you now, Connie," he said at last, breaking the silence that had followed his last speech. "I must get out here."

When it came to the real parting she made no scruples about it, but cried openly. She vowed that she could not let him go, that he was all the world to her, and that she would give up everything for him. Maurice, who was also genuinely affected, kissed her and begged her not to cry.

"Don't fret about me," he said. "Go on with your work, save your money, be a good girl, and, when you come across one, marry an honest man. Think of me sometimes—and always, if possible, with kindness."

Then, without another word, and with only a squeeze of the hand, he opened the door and sprang out. Having closed it he strode away swiftly along the pavement without once looking back. She moved to the place

he had occupied and tried to catch a glimpse of his retreating figure

"I've seen him get out of the carriage a good many times," said the coachman to himself, "but I've never known 'im leave it in that fashion before I suppose they've been 'avin' a row. Well, thank goodness, it's no concern of mine "

Ten minutes later, after a block of some minutes in the Charing Cross Road, the brougham pulled up before the stage-door of the Excelsior Music Hall The coachman waited for his mistress to alight, but, though some minutes went by, she did not do so.

"It's just as I thought," he said. "They've had a quarrel and she's been cryin', and now she doesn't like to come out with her eyes red It isn't like her, though She can generally manage to give as good as she gets."

He recalled certain occasions upon which he had fallen under the lash of her tongue. Miss Connie Plantagenet could be very lady-like when she pleased, but when she was ruffled her temper was apt to find vent in language that was the reverse of polite

When five minutes had gone by and still his mistress did not leave the carriage, the

coachman became uneasy. He was not a married man, but he was aware that ladies are liable to faint when their feelings grow too much for them. It was just possible, he thought, that such a catastrophe had happened now. He accordingly whistled to the stalwart commissionaire on duty at the stage-door, who, of course, had recognized the brougham. The latter hastened forward.

"Where is Miss Plantagenet?" he asked, believing that the man had come with a message from his mistress. "Her turn will be on in a few minutes, and the stage-manager is getting anxious"

"Just open the door, will you?" replied the coachman. "Miss Plantagenet is inside, but I've got a sort of idea she's fainted."

The commissionaire stepped back and did as requested. Yes! Miss Plantagenet was certainly there, but she was lying in a curious attitude—half on the floor and half on the seat. "She has fainted," he remarked, and then added: "What's to be done, coachman?"

"Carry her into the theatre," said the other, promptly. "The women there will know what to do. Her own maid will soon be here. She is coming along in a cab."

The commissionaire, who was a strong man, at once placed one foot on the step of the vehicle, and then leant forward into the carriage with the intention of lifting the girl out. He had placed his arm around her when he drew back with an exclamation of astonishment and alarm.

"What's this?" he cried, when he had looked at his hand. "Heaven deliver us! It's blood!"

CHAPTER IV

THERE could be no sort of doubt that the commissionaire had made a terrible discovery. For a moment the man was so frightened as to be completely dazed. The coachman, who by this time had dismounted, was in a little better condition. On noting the two men's agitation, a small crowd began to collect, and endeavoured to see the interior of the vehicle. Then a policeman, apparently thinking there was a disturbance of some kind, pushed his way through, saying as he did so : "Come along now, move on. This won't do!" Then he added : "Hulloa! What's wrong in there?"

"Something awful!" answered the frightened commissionaire. "It's Miss Connie Plantagenet, and I believe she's dead."

Taking his lamp from his belt, the policeman turned its light into the carriage, to discover that the commissionaire's suspicions were only too true. The girl was lying on

the floor with her throat cut from ear to ear.

The policeman meditated for a moment as to what he should do ; then, doubtless having arrived at a decision, ordered the coachman to mount to the box and drive the carriage into the yard at the back of the theatre. Trembling like a man with the palsy, the latter did as he was directed, and the gates were immediately closed behind them.

Meanwhile, the news had reached the theatre itself, and had caused what was akin to a panic behind the scenes. The manager, when ten o'clock came round, and there was no Miss Plantagenet, had been compelled to find a substitute for the absentee. Now the question he had to decide was whether he should go before the curtain and make the house acquainted with the awful news ? This would, in all probability, mean the closing of the theatre at once ! Or should he allow the performance to continue, and the audience to disperse unconscious of the crime ? The matter, however, was decided for him by the company, who one and all declared that they could not sing or act after such a shock. The slack-wire performer vowed that

he would fall and break his neck if he went on, while the juggler stated that he could no more go through his tricks than if he had never learnt one of them. The manager was therefore compelled to go before the footlights and announce what had taken place. After his statement the curtain was rung down, and the audience departed to swell the excited crowd in the streets outside. Meanwhile, the constable who had taken charge of the matter had communicated with Scotland Yard, and several detectives had arrived upon the scene. They questioned the coachman in the manager's private room. He informed them that he had driven from the National Music Hall to the Excelsior as usual. Sir Maurice Ogilvie was with his mistress when they left the National. They came out of the hall together and got into the brougham.

"Did you hear any cry on the way?"

"No, sir! Everything was just as usual."

"Where did Sir Maurice Ogilvie get out?"

"Half way down Belbudge Street. He pulled the check string, and jumped out directly I stopped."

"Did he seem disturbed or excited?"

"He walked off as fast as he could go, without a word of good-night, and without looking

back. If I'd a-know'd what he'd done, I'd been after him there and then "

"Never mind what you would have done," the detective returned. "Which way did he go ? "

"Towards Shaftesbury Avenue, sir," the man replied.

"Can you give us a description of how he was dressed ? "

The coachman did so to the best of his ability, the officer making a note of it in his pocket-book. The maid, Sophie, confirmed the man's evidence that Sir Maurice left the theatre in her mistress's company. She, the latter, was wearing a valuable necklace, and also two diamond bangles, when she had helped her with her cloak at the theatre.

"And they are not on her now," said the constable. "When the commissionaire and I lifted the body from the carriage there was no necklace or bangle in it "

"That will do for the present, I think," said the chief detective. "Now, what we've got to do is to find Sir Maurice Ogilvie ! "

* * * * *

After leaving the brougham Maurice strode along the pavement in the direction of Shaftesbury Avenue. He had long been aware

that Connie had some liking for him, but he had never imagined that her affection for him was so great as she had that evening proved it to be.

"Poor little girl," he said to himself, as he hastened along. "She is the best of them, after all. It is out of the question, however, that I should take her money. I wish, however, I had a little more capital to play with. (He stopped in his walk.) Egad! I never thought of that!"

He slipped his finger into his waistcoat pocket and brought forth the packet containing the engagement ring he had presented to Miss Gardiner. It had cost him sixty guineas. Surely, he argued, he ought to be able to raise thirty pounds on it. With this thought in his mind, he hurried along until he came to a pawnbroker's shop, which he entered. When he emerged again, he was twenty sovereigns richer than he had been when he left the brougham.

"Now to get out of London," he said to himself. "It's just half-past ten and my train leaves at midnight."

He accordingly set off to walk to Euston.

He had plenty of time to spare, so he sauntered leisurely along, reaching the station

half an hour before the train started. He purchased a ticket, and, when the train drew up at the platform, selected a third-class carriage and installed himself in it. In due course it steamed out of the station and his journey to the North had commenced.

To Maurice's delight, he had the compartment to himself, so when he tired of the periodicals he had procured he stretched himself out upon the seat and slept contentedly until Northampton was reached. Here he roused himself and looked out of the window. When the train recommenced its journey he resumed his slumbers until his arrival at Crewe. It had been daylight some time when he reached his destination. On the journey down he had made up his mind as to what he should do when he arrived in Liverpool. Accordingly, on leaving the railway station, he made his way to that portion of the town in which the greater number of sailors' lodging-houses are to be found. As doubtless some of my readers are aware, this is not a particularly savoury quarter, nor are the keepers of the lodging-houses in question remarkable for their honesty, or for their Christian charity towards their fellow men. Maurice inspected several of

the buildings from the outside, trying to make up his mind as to which he should enter. Before he had settled the question, however, another thought struck him, and he steered for what is technically termed "a slop shop," at the corner of that particular street. Garments of all sorts and descriptions decorated the windows, while sailors' oilskins and sou'westers, pea jackets for cold nights on deck, Crimean shirts, and, indeed, every sort of clothing fitted for the sea, was to be seen within the shop or fluttering in the wind outside.

Upon entering, Maurice was received by a gentleman who, it was easy to see, hailed from the other side of Jordan.

"Good-morning, ma tear sir," said the latter, bowing and rubbing his hands before Maurice. "Vat can I do for you? Is it curios that you vant? If so, pelief me, I have de most beautiful collection in all de world for your inspection."

"I don't want anything in that line, thank you," Maurice returned. "I want an old suit of clothes and one or two odds and ends for a sea voyage. I am going before the mast, and it would be no sort of use my applying for a berth dressed as I am now."

The Jew looked his customer over, noting

as he did so the fashionable cut of his clothes, the valuable gold watch chain, and the signet ring on the little finger of the left hand. He wondered what this handsome swell had done that he wanted to get out of England ; but he was too astute to let him see that he suspected anything.

“ Oh, ma tear, I can fit you out from top to toe,” he answered. “ I will make you so dot your own brother would not know you. Let me see vot you vill vant.”

He ran through the list of garments that in his opinion would be required in order to turn a landsman into the likeness of a sailor. After which he produced them from one of the many drawers the shop contained, and laid them upon the counter. They were an extraordinary collection, but, so far as Maurice was concerned, they had the advantage of not being new.

“ If they should happen to fit, they would suit me exactly,” he said to the Jew. “ Where can I try them ?”

“ You shall have my own room,” the other replied, rubbing his hands once more. “ Pe-hief me, there is not another man in all de town who could have found you such peautiful clothes.”

So saying, he took Maurice into the room at the back of the shop. It was filthy beyond the power of words to express, and smelt abominably. A small, hump-backed woman, of the proprietor's own nationality, and possibly his wife, was overhauling a heap of clothes upon the greasy floor. The former bade her begone, and then brought a box forward, on which he invited Maurice to seat himself. A quarter of an hour later the latter had made his selection and his own clothes had been carefully folded up and set on one side by the Jew. Had any one looked in upon them, he would have found it difficult to have recognized the trim dandy of the London clubs in the roughly-dressed individual who sat upon a sugar box in the Jew's back room. A strong sea chest that, from its appearance, had seen some knocking about, was added to the list, and in it the wardrobe was packed. Then came the bargaining. The dealer had placed an exorbitant price upon the clothes he had sold, but for those Maurice had discarded he offered a sum that was ridiculously below their real value. Seeing that he was in the Jew's power, the other resigned himself to the situation, stipulating, however, that he should

be allowed to leave the chest at the shop until he should call for it again

"Of course, ma tear, of course," said the Jew, with great generosity "I vill guard it vor you just like it vos my own."

"By the way, there is one other matter," said Maurice, "that you may possibly be able to arrange for me. What do you think of this?"

As he spoke he took up his watch and chain, which had been lying on a heap of clothes near by, and showed them to the other.

"I don't want to go on board with anything like this on me," he continued. "It would give me away at once. Now, what offer would you be prepared to make me for them?"

"Ah, that all depends upon what you like to agzept," was the reply "I have not much sale for vatches and chains of that sort in my shop. I am not a bawnbroker."

"I presume you would buy anything that came in your way if you saw the chance of making a good bargain?" Maurice retorted "I am prepared to sell at a sacrifice, but you make your mind easy I am not going to give it away."

"There is very liddle dat is given away

in this world," the Jew replied. "Let me look at the vatch."

He took it in his dirty fingers, turned it over and over, opened it, examined the works, scrutinised the Hall Mark, and then overhauled the chain, link by link.

"The watch is too old a pattern," he said at last, by way of cheapening it.

"I bought it less than five years ago," its owner replied. "You can't call that old."

"But it may go wrong the moment it comes into my bossession," the Hebrew answered. "But dere, I will give you five pounds for it and two pounds for de chain. But even then I shall be losing money."

"You old rascal!" said Maurice scornfully. "You know as well as possible that what you are offering seven pounds for is worth more than thirty."

"Thirty pounds?" cried the Jew in horror. "Take it, ma tear, to Mr. Levy at the corner, and you'll see that he won't give you more than I have said for it. Why, I should be ruined for ever if I gave you eight for it"

He did not return the watch, however, and Maurice noted the covetous gleam in his eyes as he regarded it

"Ten or nothing," said the latter.

"I will give you nine. I will give you that, but not another farthing."

"I have said ten or nothing."

"Nine pounds ten. Not a penny more"

"Ten or nothing You won't Very well, give back the watch. I'll take it elsewhere"

"No, no. I'll give you ten pounds for it, because you bought de other things. But it's too much money. I shall never get it back again"

He conducted Maurice into the shop, and with many sighs counted out the money due to him after the amount for the clothes and chest had been deducted, but not before he had deposited the watch and chain in the large iron safe that stood in the further right-hand corner of the room.

"I'll come back for the chest some time to-day," said the young man "I'm off now to look for a ship."

From the old clothes shop Maurice made his way to one of the large shipping offices and mixed with the crowd of seamen he discovered there They were of all descriptions, and apparently of all nationalities. Englishmen, however, appeared to be in the minority. Maurice addressed himself to a smart-looking

young man, and inquired if he could tell him of any sailing ship leaving at once for Australia.

"There is the *Fotheringay*," said the man, without hesitation. "She's lying out in the stream. She'll sail this afternoon."

"Do you know if they happen to want another hand?"

"The skipper's in the office now," the man replied. "I saw him talking to one of the clerks only a few minutes back. You'd best ask him. Now's your time, for that's him coming across now."

As he spoke a tall, broad-shouldered man, with a closely-cropped brown beard, and a by no means unpleasant face, came towards them. Maurice went up to him and touched his cap respectfully.

"You're the captain of the *Fotheringay*, I believe, sir?" he said.

"Yes, quite right," said the other. "What do you want with me?"

"I thought you might happen to have a vacancy for another man," Maurice answered. "I am anxious to try my luck in Australia and want to work my passage out if I can manage it."

The captain laughed good-humouredly. He

had caught a glimpse of Maurice's hands and had noted their condition.

"What do you know about sailing?" he inquired. "From the state of your hands, I reckon you are better fitted for the cuddy than the forecastle"

"I don't think you'll find me wanting if you'll only take me, sir," said Maurice. "I used to be considered a very good yachtsman; at any rate, I promise you I will do my best"

"Well, as it happens, I want three more men," the skipper returned, "and it's a hard matter to get hold of the right sort. I've a mind to try you"

"If you give me a trial you shan't regret it"

"Then come along with me"

He escorted Maurice to the office, where the necessary details were at once arranged. Then the young man went off to fetch his sea-chest, and afterwards, having hired a boat, was put on board the *Fotheringay*. He immediately reported himself to the chief mate, and then carried his chest forward.

"Hulloa, matey!" said a hand coming up the forecastle. "Where do you hail from? Going to share our drawing-room with us?"

"I didn't like the look of the cuddy so I came forrard," said Maurice, with ready wit.

"Have you got a spare bunk?"

"Lor' bless you, plenty of them," the man replied. "Take this one next to mine, it's the one poor Bill Jones died in' last voyage."

Maurice appropriated the bunk, in spite of its sinister association, and, when he had stowed away his chest, returned to the deck and was immediately taken charge of by the bos'un.

"What's you name?" inquired that individual.

"William Patterson," Maurice replied, mentioning the name he had given the authorities at the shipping office.

"Well, William Patterson, we'll see what you are made of," the bos'un continued, and found him work forthwith.

The *Fotheringay* was a full-rigged ship of about twelve hundred tons. She was the property of a Liverpool firm, and was in the regular trade between that port and the capital of New South Wales. When Maurice had been on board her an hour or so the passengers arrived, and he was detailed to give a hand with the baggage they brought with them. With two exceptions they were not

interesting There was a consumptive curate and his wife, who were taking the voyage in the hope that it would benefit the former's health: an elderly spinster of the school-mistress order; a dissipated young man of about twenty-one; and last, but more important than all, so far as Maurice was concerned, an elderly gentleman and his daughter, a pretty girl of some twenty years of age. Shortly after their arrival on board the tug made its appearance, the hawser was passed, the anchor was weighed, and the *Fotheringay's* voyage to Australia had commenced

Of the voyage itself there is very little to tell. At first, as was only to be expected, Maurice was awkward. The boatswain and the officers, however, soon discovered that he was doing his best and made allowances for his shortcomings. By the time they had been a week at sea he was as handy as any man on board. It would be idle to say that he derived any great pleasure from his new life. The difference between fashionable chambers in London, and a ship's forecastle is well marked. Nor was the company, or the food, of the description to which he had been accustomed. However, he knew that he had made his bed of his own free will, and for this

reason he was determined to lie upon it as comfortably as was possible under the circumstances.

The *Fotheringay* did not touch at any port on her outward voyage. Four degrees south of the equator the consumptive curate died, and his body was consigned to the Deep. The dissipated youth on the other hand by this time had quite recovered, while the young lady, whose name, so the cuddy steward informed Maurice, was Nina Sherrard, seemed to grow prettier every day. Her father was a wealthy station owner in New South Wales, and he and his daughter were both so fond of the sea that they preferred the long voyage and rest in a sailing ship to the rush and bustle of a mail boat. The pair had been enjoying a lengthy holiday in England, and were now returning to visit their Australian stations. Maurice was wont to watch Miss Sherrard, seated in her chair under the awning, or patrolling the deck, with something that was very near akin to an aching heart. He wondered when it would be his good fortune to talk to a lady again.

One evening, when they had left the Cape of Good Hope behind them, Maurice was at the wheel. The sea was very calm, and

there was scarcely a breath of wind stirring. Miss Sherrard and her father were pacing the deck, pausing now and again to look over the taffrail at the smooth waters astern. Suddenly the young lady stopped and held up her hand.

"Hark!" she said. "What was that?"

They listened, but for some moments heard nothing. Then a curious moaning sound reached them. It seemed to come from somewhere astern, and was like nothing either of them had heard before.

"What made that noise, do you think?" Miss Sherrard inquired of Maurice.

"A whale, I should say," he replied.

The words had scarcely left his lips before an enormous black object rose from the water scarcely a cable's length from the vessel's side. The noise was repeated, and then the Leviathan disappeared as mysteriously as he had come.

"That was really very extraordinary," said Mr. Sherrard. "I have made the voyage several times, but have never seen a whale so close before. Have you?"

For a moment Maurice forgot that he was only a common sailor.

"I have never been in this part before,"

he said. "I remember, however, when I had my yacht off the Norwegian coast, hearing a very strange noise alongside. It was made by a grampus."

At that moment the mate came up and addressed Miss Sherrard, asking if she had seen the whale. This gave Maurice time to draw into his shell once more. Though he did not know it the young lady had made a mental note of what he had said.

"If he had once owned a yacht of sufficient size to go to Norway, what could have brought him down to this?" she asked herself. "He looks like a gentleman, and I am sure he is one." Then she added, very softly: "Poor fellow!"

From that moment Maurice did not speak to her during the voyage. He used to watch her, however, when she appeared on deck. She was certainly a very pretty girl, and, as his friend the steward informed him, was thought to be a great heiress. He made up his mind that if ever the opportunity presented itself he would ask her father to give him some work on one of his stations.

It was some time before that opportunity did present itself. One afternoon, however, Mr. Sherrard came forward to the fo'c'sle

head to watch some porpoises playing under the vessel's nose. Maurice, who had been coiling a rope at the foremast saw that this was his chance. He accordingly went up to the old gentleman and raised his hat.

Though he did not know it at that moment the happiness of all his life was trembling in the balance.

CHAPTER V

"MAY I speak to you for a moment, sir?" Maurice inquired as Mr. Sherrard turned towards him.

"Certainly," the other replied. "What can I do for you?"

"I am anxious to get something to do on a sheep or cattle Station when I reach Australia," said Maurice. "I have been told that you employ a lot of labour. Would it be possible for you to give me work?"

"You are forsaking the sea, then?"

"I only signed for the voyage out," Maurice answered. "I think I can promise you that if you will give me something to do, you will not find me wanting. I can ride, and I know something about horses."

"It's just possible I may be able to find you work," the old gentleman returned. "At any rate, call at my office in Sydney, and I will see what I can do for you. Now, for-

give my saying something I don't want to hurt your feelings, nor do I desire to pry into your private concerns During the voyage however, I have watched you, and I have come to the conclusion that you're a gentleman, and also that you are in trouble."

"I've been a fool," said Maurice, "that's all. Now, like every other fool, I'm paying the penalty of my folly."

"Have you no friends who would help you?"

"Plenty of so-called friends," Maurice replied bitterly. "But they are of no use to me"

"Well, if you will call at my office as I said just now, I'll do the best I can for you"

Then he went aft to where his daughter was sitting reading near the companion ladder. He told her of Maurice's request.

"Any one could see that he is a gentleman, papa," was her reply "I am not inquisitive, but I must confess I should like to hear his life's history"

That evening, during his watch on deck, Maurice was leaning on the bulwarks looking out to sea. He was thinking of his old life and speculating as to what would happen to him in the future. The chief mate and the

dissipated youth were seated on a hen-coop behind him smoking. He could hear all that was passing between them, and for this reason he was about to move away, when his attention was arrested by a remark let fall by the youth.

"Ever seen Connie Plantagenet? I should just think I had. I used to go once or twice every week to the 'Excelsior' while she was there. She *could* dance, and no mistake. I wonder if they'll ever catch the man who murdered her."

The chief mate made some reply, and then got up and bade the other good-night. As for Maurice, he clung to the bulwarks as if he were stupefied.

What on earth could they mean? Connie murdered? It was impossible! At last, unable to bear the suspense any longer, he turned and walked across to where the young man was seated.

"Excuse me," he began, "but did I understand you to say a moment ago that Miss Connie Plantagenet, the music-hall artist, had been murdered?"

"That's right," answered the youth. "Didn't you know it? She was murdered the night before we sailed. They found her

in her carriage outside the 'Excelsior' with her throat cut."

"Good Heavens! And who is supposed to have committed the crime?"

"Oh, a Society swell. Probably you've heard of him. He was known to be very sweet on her at one time. *A Sir Maurice Ogilvie!*"

Maurice will never be able to tell you how he got away from the spot. Indeed, he has no recollection of anything that happened for some time afterwards, "Connie dead! Connie dead!" The words rang in his brain with ghastly reiteration. And he, of all men, was supposed to be her murderer. What could it mean? If what the young man had said were true, then she must have been murdered between the time of his leaving her and her arrival at the "Excelsior." She had only a short distance to go then, so who could have done it? There was one thing that struck him with great force; this was the fact that his running away would certainly be regarded as a further proof of his guilt. What would his friends think? He knew what sort of charity he might expect to receive from the Fashionable World. Already the bloodhounds of the law would be

upon his track. What was more probable than that he would be arrested in Sydney and taken back to England to stand his trial for the murder.

When his watch was at an end he went below, but not to sleep. The ghastly picture of the dead girl, lying in her brougham, was continually before his mind's eye. He could not rid himself of it do what he would. It kept him company that night, and all the next day. On the day following they were due to arrive at Sydney

"I suppose I shall know my fate as soon as we get in," he said to himself. "Immediately we are berthed, a couple of detectives will come aboard and inquire for William Patterson. I shall be called up, the hand-cuffs will be placed upon my wrists, and Miss Sherard and the whole ship's company will know that I am the man who is accused of murdering poor little Connie. Heaven help me!"

By this time he had plenty of leisure to overhaul the case and his position with regard to it. He had been seen by the employers of the National Theatre of Varieties to enter the murdered woman's brougham. Her coachman would be able to swear to his leav-

ing it. The pawnbroker would be in a position to give evidence as to his disposing of the diamond ring. The Jew, in Liverpool, if he felt so inclined, could depose as to the fact of his arrival in that city, while the captain and officers of the *Fotheringay* could testify as to his presence on board under the name of Patterson.

"I shall not stand the remotest chance of being able to disprove the charge," he said to himself after he had given it at least an hour's consideration.

Shortly after daybreak next morning they entered the Heads, where a tug met them and prepared to tow them to the vessel's usual berth on Circular Quay. The port officials came aboard with the Officer of Health, when Maurice was on the fo'c'sle head. He felt sick with fear lest they should prove to be police officers, but it soon became plain to him that they were not, for nothing occurred to justify his alarm. So far all was well. Half an hour later he had the satisfaction of seeing them go over the side again.

Some thirty minutes later they were approaching their berth and the passengers were preparing to go ashore. At a summons from the skipper Maurice went aft, to stand

by with a line. While he was there Mr. Sherrard came up to him.

"Are you still of the same mind about taking the Bush?" he inquired.

He had been watching the young man for the past two days and had noticed that there was something amiss with him.

"Yes sir, I think so," Maurice replied, but without any real interest. He felt that he could not be certain that he would have the chance of indulging his fancy.

"In that case, don't forget to come to my office," said the squatter. "I think I can safely promise to find you employment."

"You are very good," Maurice returned, "and I am more obliged to you than I can say."

A quarter of an hour later the *Fotheringay* was lying alongside the wharf and Mr. Sherrard and his daughter—who had been welcomed by a crowd of friends—and the other passengers, made their way ashore. At last the time arrived for Maurice to leave the vessel also.

"I'm sorry that we're losing you, my lad," said the ancient boatswain, when he bade him good-bye. "You've done your work

well while you've been with us and I was in hopes you were going to ship with us again "

" I almost wish I were," Maurice replied
" But first I am going to see what life is like out here "

Then he bade his shipmates good-bye and departed, with his chest upon his shoulder That night he slept in a lodging-house near the Quay After all his fears it seemed difficult to believe that he was still a free man How was he to know that Fortune had been standing by him ? How was he to tell that a man exactly answering his description had been traced by the London detectives across the Channel, and as far as Amsterdam, where he was discovered to have offered some diamonds to a dealer The Jew at Liverpool might have put them upon the scent, but he was a gentleman who invariably kept his own counsel, especially where the police were concerned What was stranger still, Maurice had not been photographed since he was a boy, so that the authorities at Scotland Yard had nothing to help them in that direction During the voyage he had grown a beard, the sea air and hot sun had tanned his skin and even the skipper, who had done so on one

occasion could not now have found fault with the condition of his hands.

That night he arrived at a somewhat momentous decision. After mature consideration he had determined not to avail himself of Mr. Sherrard's offer. The latter might give him work, at the same time he argued that in applying he might be attracting unnecessary attention to himself. No! He thought the better plan would be to make his way into the Bush, and to get work on his own account.

Next morning he was guilty of an act that might have been unwise, but which he felt he must commit even had his life depended upon his not doing so. He made his way to the public library, and asked boldly to be permitted to see the copies of an English paper for the months of June and July. After a short interval the files were placed before him. With trembling hands he turned the pages until he found the date he wanted. On opening the paper he soon discovered that he had not been misinformed, upon the second page was a paragraph headed: "Murder of a Music Hall Singer." It was but a short account of the crime, but it told the story with terrible distinctness. The next paper gave an account of the inquest,

the evidence of the murdered woman's maid and coachman, the discovery by the Commissioner, and the suspicious fact that the dead girl's jewellery was missing; also the pawnbroker's assertion that a diamond ring was sold to him on the same evening, at a time which must have been less than a quarter of an hour after the murder had been committed, by a gentleman whose appearance tallied exactly with that of the man who was suspected of being the assassin. Then followed the verdict of the coroner's jury—Wilful murder against Maurice Ogilvie.

In the next dozen or so papers there were various paragraphs relating to the case. The police, it was said, had discovered an important clue, and were busily engaged following it up.

When he left the public library, Maurice made his way to the Domain and seated himself upon one of the benches, in the hope of being able to come to a decision regarding his future movements. One thing was quite certain; he must leave Sydney as quickly as possible. It was apparent to him that every moment he spent there added to his danger. But where was he to go? He was as ignorant of the Bush as he was of his own

future. Accordingly, on his way back to his lodgings, he purchased a map of the Colony, and studied it attentively. He noticed that the railway ran out as far as Bourke, a town on the Darling River, but that did not tell him much. From one of his fellow-lodgers he learnt that the town in question was a great cattle centre, a terminus for what his informant called "the Overlanders," or, in other words, the drovers who brought down from the great stations in the interior, the cattle intended for the Sydney market. There would doubtless be work there, he told himself, and he therefore determined to start for Bourke by the first train in the morning.

That afternoon he sold his chest and sea-going clothes, and purchased a pair of rough blankets and two or three other indispensable articles. His friend at the lodging-house showed him how to roll his swag, and the easiest way of carrying it.

That evening he went for a long walk through the city. It was a wet, cheerless night, and his spirits had sunk almost to zero. So depressed was he that he almost wished himself back on board the *Fotheringay* again, and at sea.

Into what quarter of the town he strayed

he did not know, but it was not a very reputable one. In certain streets, the Chinese race predominated, in others he discovered Englishmen and, sad to relate of a lower order even than the Celestial.

He had turned from a broad thoroughfare into a somewhat narrower street, and was making his way along it, when it struck him that it was time for him to be returning to his lodgings. Being in complete ignorance of the locality, he was looking about him for someone of whom he might inquire his way, when he was startled by hearing a loud cry for help. It came from a narrow alleyway on his right. Without thinking of the consequences of his action, he ran to the assistance of the caller. By the light of a gas lamp at the further end, he could see three men of the larrikin type struggling with another, who had fallen to the ground. Maurice's arrival distracted their attention, and allowed the man time to get up. Divining his intention, one of the men charged at Maurice, aiming a vicious blow at him as he did so. The new comer, however, was too quick for him. He had been an expert boxer in his college days, and before his assailant knew quite what had happened, he had stretched him out with a

blow from the shoulder that was destined to cause the ruffian great dental difficulties for some considerable time. By this time the fight had become general. The first victim was an elderly man, slightly advanced in liquor, but with plenty of fight left in him.

"Stand with your back to the wall," cried Maurice, "and let them have it." But their three assailants—for the man Maurice had bowled over was up by this time, and eager to continue the fray and to be revenged—were not to be treated with contempt.

How the battle would have ended it is impossible to say but a diversion was caused by the appearance of a policeman. Realising that they were the aggressors, the three larrikins took to their heels and disappeared.

"What's the meaning of this?" inquired the constable, as he came up.

"Thim three divils set on to me," said the man Maurice had assisted. "I was coming along this passage as peaceful as a Christian, when one of 'em made a grab at me watch-chain. Shure it's a wonder he didn't have it too. Then they all pitched into me, and if it hadn't been for this chap here (turning to Maurice) bedad! it's my belief they would have done for me altogether."

He shook Maurice by the hand, and vowed that he would never forget the service he had rendered him.

His name was Patrick Callaghan, he explained, and he had only come down to Sydney from the Bush that day.

"You'd better look after what money you have," said the policeman, "or you will lose it before you know where you are. If you'll be guided by me, you'll keep out of this quarter of the town. It's the roughest part of Sydney, and that's saying something."

Then they left the alley together and passed into the street, where Maurice inquired how he could get back to his lodgings.

"Oh, but bedad, we must have a drink before we part," said the man from the Bush, who had no intention of allowing his comrade-in-arms to drop out of his life so quickly. "It's mesilf that's thinkin' that the way ye knocked that rascal down would have done credit to Ould Ireland. Come along me bhoy, and let's have a glass together."

But Maurice excused himself. He wanted to get back to his lodgings as quickly as possible, as it would be necessary for him to be up early to catch the train. He thereupon bade the little man good-bye, and set off

with the policeman, who had volunteered to show him a short cut by which he could reach his destination. Maurice expressed the fear that he would be taking him off his beat, but the other declared that this was not the case.

"I have to meet the sergeant in that direction," he said, "and I don't think you would be able to find the way from what I could tell you."

They accordingly set off.

In reply to a question put to him by the policeman, Maurice informed him that he had but lately arrived in Sydney.

"I thought you were an Englishman," said his companion; "so am I. What part do you hail from?"

"I have lived in London for a number of years," Maurice replied, "but I was born in the North of England."

"I am a Devonshire man myself," said the other. "Bonnie Devon! My father was a doctor near Exeter. I wonder if I shall ever see the old country again. It doesn't look much like it at present."

Maurice questioned him regarding the police force, and inquired whether it was difficult to enter.

"Not over and above, if you are in good health But most of the Englishman who go into the police prefer the Mounted Branch," he said, "For my part I like the foot"

After ten minutes walking they reached the point where the policeman was due to meet the sergeant He had not arrived when they got there, so they chatted together under the lamp for a few minutes before separating

"You must have some exciting experiences occasionally in the quarter we have just left," said Maurice

"No, I can't say that I do," answered the constable "On the contrary, it is very quiet—in fact, nothing moving. It has always been my ambition to make a big arrest, but it's not come off yet Perhaps it may some day"

How little did he dream that the man he was addressing was none other than the famous Sir Maurice Ogilvie, for whom the English police were searching throughout the world

Five minutes later the sergeant made his appearance round the corner, and came towards them. He was a fine-looking man, and carried himself like a Life Guardsman. As he

came up he glanced at Maurice, who bade the constable a polite good-night and then walked away. He had not got very far, however, before the sergeant overtook him. It was as if an icy-cold hand were being placed upon his heart when he felt the other clutch him by the arm, and heard him say : " Maurice Ogilvie ! "

They were near a gas-lamp, and he could see the sergeant's face distinctly.

" George Harbridge ! " he cried. " Good Heavens ! To think of its being you ! "

" Then I am not mistaken. It is you, Maurice ? "

That both were much overcome by this chance meeting, there could be no doubt. To Maurice, it seemed as if all were lost. His presence in Australia was known, and it appeared as if nothing could save him from arrest. He and Harbridge had been at school and the University together, and when the other had left England suddenly—some years before—Maurice had been one of the last to see him before his disappearance.

" Maurice, dear old fellow, this is a terrible business ! " said Harbridge at last.

" What is to be done ? " Maurice inquired.

"Heaven knows ! I must think ! You are not safe in Sydney. I recognised you at once despite your beard, and others may do the same. We must have a long talk together, but not in the street. Where are you staying ? "

Maurice informed him, but the other shook his head.

"That won't do either ; they know me too well there Look here, I'm off duty at midnight, and it wants only half-an-hour to that time now I'll tell you what you had better do—go on to the Post Office, and wait for me on the pavement outside. As soon as I've changed my clothes I'll meet you there "

"Then you're not going to arrest me now ? "

"Neither now nor ever," said his friend "But I must discover what is best to be done for you, or somebody else may. Oh, Maurice, my dear old friend, to think of our meeting like this after the past days ! "

Maurice stopped, and laid his hand on the other's arm No one was near ; indeed, so far as could be seen, they had the entire street to themselves.

"One moment, George, before we go any

further. Do you, or do you not, believe me to be guilty ? ”

His friend held out his hand.

“ That is the best answer I can give you,” he said.

She was a generous little soul, and would have given me anything."

"The fact of your pawning that diamond ring helps to make things look very black against you. Where did it come from?"

"It was the engagement ring I gave Miss Gardiner, and which she returned to me that morning."

"Well, Miss Gardiner should be able to recognise the ring, and so be able to settle a point in your favour. But what can have become of the other girl's jewels? They say she was wearing a valuable necklace, and a couple of bracelets."

"There can be no doubt that whoever killed her took them," Maurice replied. "Oh, George, old man, you can't think how I value your assistance, and it gives me fresh heart to know that you do not believe me guilty of this crime. In London I suppose no one thinks me innocent."

"It was the running away that did it," Harbridge replied. "If you had stood your ground you might possibly have been able to get yourself out of the scrape. But when you recollect that you cleared out the same night you cannot blame people if they think it points conclusively to your guilt."

"But you must bear the fact in mind, George, that I knew nothing of the murder when I left London. Think for a moment, and you will see that it was impossible for the news to have reached me. When I said good-bye to her everything was right. I went straight to Euston, and there took the midnight express to Liverpool, and next morning went aboard my ship. I did not buy a paper, neither did I see one on the voyage. I can remember now, on the first night out, hearing a couple of the hands discuss a terrible murder, but very naturally did not connect the woman who was killed with Connie. Why should I have done so?"

"I can see your point, but I am very much afraid public opinion would not. And, now, what are your plans? It will not be safe for you to remain in Sydney."

"I had made up my mind to leave by the early train for Bourke to-morrow or rather this morning, and thence make my way into the Bush in search of work."

"You couldn't do better. And, what's more, I fancy I can help you, I've a friend in Bourke who might be able to put you in the way of something. His name is Merry-

weather, and he is a Stock and Station Agent. I did him what he considers a good turn once, and he'd like to be able to repay it. I'll go home now, and write him a letter introducing you as an old friend. What time does the train leave ? ”

“ At six o'clock.”

“ Then I'll meet you at the station at ten minutes to six. It's a quarter-past one now ”

“ One moment, George, before you go. How do I stand with regard to the police out here ? Of course they are on the look out for me ? ”

“ That's so. We've had a description forwarded to us, but I don't think you're much to fear so long as you are careful, and don't commit yourself. The impression the English police have is that you are on the Continent. By the way, you have not told me yet what name you have adopted. I must know that to put it in the letter.”

“ William Patterson,” Maurice replied. “ It is not a very brilliant flight of fancy, but it will do as well as any other.”

“ Just And now you must be off to your lodgings. We'll meet at the railway station at ten minutes to six.”

"God, bless you George, old man, for proving yourself such a true friend."

"In memory of Auld Lang Syne, Maurice. Now, before I forget, just bear in mind the fact that I am Sergeant Davidson. No one ever knew quite what became of George Harbridge. I'm afraid he must have been a sad dog, from all accounts."

They separated, and Maurice returned to his lodgings. At a quarter to six he was at the railway station.

He had taken his ticket, and had stowed his swag away under the seat of the carriage before Harbridge put in an appearance upon the platform. They greeted each other, and then the latter produced the letter he had written, and handed it to Maurice.

"Remember me to Merryweather," he said, "and take my advice; for the present, at any rate get as far inland as you can."

Maurice promised to do this, and was then warned by the guard to take his seat. He did so, and bade his friend good-bye from the window. Then the whistle sounded, and the train moved out of the station. That was the last he was destined to see of Harbridge for many a long day.

"That man is no more guilty of the murder

than I am," said Harbridge to himself as he watched the train disappear. "But Heaven alone can tell how he'll prove his innocence. Poor old Maurice! We used to have some grand times together."

Perhaps that journey to Bourke was the most wearisome Maurice had ever undertaken. He was going out into an unknown world, to enter upon a new phase of life. The aspect of the country through which the train passed was strange to him, while the outlandish names of the stations—Dubbo, Nyngan, Coolabah and Mooculta—seemed to impress upon him the difference that existed between the old life and the new.

It had been dark some time when he reached his destination. And as if to add to his depression it commenced to rain heavily as he left the station. Bourke cannot, even by her bitterest enemies, be described as a wet place, but she makes up for it when the clouds do pour forth their store upon her. Any one who has been there then will not readily forget the experience. A porter, whom he questioned, recommended Maurice to an inn, and he set off to walk there. By the time he reached it he was carrying many pounds of real estate about with him.

That night he made his first acquaintance with a genuine Bush hotel. It was certainly a novel experience. For the benefit of the uninitiated an explanation may not be out of place. In up-country Townships the majority of hotels are divided into parts—one being set aside for squatters, bank managers, insurance agents and other important folk, while the other is given over to the shearer swag-men, bullock-driver, and the humbler members of the great Bush world.

Being resolved to shirk nothing, Maurice decided for the latter side, and accordingly made his way into the bar. Supper was soon supplied, after which he was shown to a room. When he entered he discovered that he was to share it with a comparatively intoxicated sailor, from a river steamer, and a hopelessly inebriated swag-man from the Great Beyond. His fo'c'sle experience, however, had been sufficient to accustom him to the roughest of rough society, and so long as his companions were content to snore peacefully and to leave him alone, he did not feel inclined to resent their society.

The night passed without an adventure, and next morning, after breakfast, he inquired for Mr. Merryweather's office, and was in-

formed that it was in an adjoining street. He accordingly made his way thither, to discover a small wooden dwelling with an iron roof standing in a small garden where the pepper-tree thrived luxuriantly—but nothing else

Mr. Merryweather proved to be a tall, grizzled man of upwards of sixty years of age. He was the possessor of a very bald head and a long white beard, which he had a habit of stroking continually when conversing. He looked up from his desk in the middle of the room, as Maurice entered the verandah.

"Well, my man," he said, through the French window, "what can I do for you?"

"I have a letter of introduction to you from a friend in Sydney," Maurice replied. He was on the point of adding, "George Harbridge," but fortunately he was able to stop himself in time, and to substitute "Sergeant Davidson."

"From Davidson," exclaimed the agent, as he opened the letter. "I have not heard from him for some time past. I hope he is well?"

"Quite well," Maurice replied. "I shouldn't say he was often ailing."

When the other had perused the letter, he

placed it in his pocket, and then glanced up again at Maurice.

"I must beg your pardon for not having asked you to be seated," he said. "Pray take a chair. Davidson tells me you were friends in England."

"We were at school together," Maurice returned.

"And he wants me to help you to obtain some work in the Bush. Have you any notion of what you can do?"

"I cannot say that I have," Maurice answered. "I know nothing about it, you see. If I have a preference at all, it would be in favour of joining one of those—Over-landing parties, don't they call them, which go up to Queensland for cattle."

"In that case I think I can help you," the other declared. "A friend of mine, one of the best drovers on the road, is leaving to-morrow for the Diamantina district, to take over a mob. Very probably I could persuade him to take you on."

"I should be exceedingly obliged to you if you could," Maurice replied. "I am anxious to get something to do as soon as possible."

"Dick Manton is staying at the Pastoral

Hotel. If you'll come along with me, we'll interview him at once "

Maurice expressed his willingness to do so, and then they set off

Now, the Pastoral Hotel is, or was the finest hotel in Bourke, and it is only in the proper order of things that such a celebrity as Mr Manton should put up there. When they entered, they discovered the latter individual in the act of eating his breakfast. Being called upon, when on the road, to endure many hardships, he made up for it by leading the life of a sybarite when in the town.

He was certainly a character in his way, as Maurice was very soon to find out. He had been in the bush all his life, and had spent the greater part of that time in the pursuit of his present calling. His appearance might be said to be that of the typical Australian-bred bushman, and the portrait will doubtless be recognised by those who know the class of individual when I inform you that his height was as nearly as possible six feet. His shoulders were broad and muscular ; his legs long and very slim, and a trifle bowed, by overmuch riding at an early age His complexion was tanned almost the colour of mahogany, and he wore both beard and moustache, the

latter being of a soft wavy brown. As Maurice learnt later, he was an unequalled horseman, in tracking almost as clever as a black fellow; a first-rate judge of stock, a hard drinker at certain times; a trifle quarrelsome in his cups, and a past master of the grammar of bad language.

"'Morning, Merryweather," he said, looking up from a piled-up plateful of bacon and eggs. "Heavy rain last night. Tracks a bit sticky out back, I'll be bound. Shan't be sorry when I'm on the other side of the Warrego."

After that he solemnly shovelled away food in silence. It struck Maurice that he had never seen a man eat with such enjoyment or so fast.

"Allow me to introduce a friend of a friend to you, Dick," said Mr. Merryweather. "Mr Patterson, here, has only lately arrived from England, and is anxious to try his hand at Overlanding. I thought, perhaps if you have not completed your party, you might be able to give him his first lesson at the game. I should take it as a personal favour if you could see your way to it."

The bacon and eggs were by this time out of sight, and Mr. Manton had buried his

nose in his coffee-cup. When it emerged again, he ejaculated the single word, "Ride?"

"Yes, I think I can safely say that I can ride," Maurice replied. "I used to do a lot of hunting at home"

Mr Manton grunted scornfully.

"Wait until the brutes break in the dark," he said, "when the scrub's so thick that you can't see half a horse's length in front of you, and you don't know the lay of the land. *Then* you'll be able to say you know something of riding. However, as it happens, I want another hand. For our friend's sake here, I'll take you on if you like. Got any horses?"

Maurice replied that he had not, but stated that he thought he had enough money to purchase a pair

"In that case get them as soon as you can then," said Manton, "and take care they don't take you in over them. Tell whoever you buy them from that you're with me, Dick Manton, and they won't do you more than's necessary then!"

"I'll take care of that," said Mr. Merryweather. "I know a man who has got a very decent pair for sale. They've just come down from Cunnamulla, and are in good

fettle. Their owner is in want of money, and will probably sell both for twenty pounds. You couldn't do better."

Maurice stared. In his old life, a pair of good horses could scarcely have been purchased for twenty pounds.

"When you've secured your horses, come round and let me know," said Manton. "I'll put you on at the regular terms, and we shall be leaving here to-morrow." Then to Merryweather he continued: "Sailor Jim and the black boys are outside now."

In compliance with his employer's instructions, Maurice accompanied Mr Merryweather from the hotel, not, however before he had been called upon to make a libation to the shrine of Bacchus, without which it would appear, no transaction can be brought to a satisfactory conclusion in the Bush.

"Now you can say that you've not only seen but have been employed by the famous Dick Manton," said Mr. Merryweather, as they left the hotel. "In my opinion, if you were to hunt all Australia through, you would not find his equal in his own particular line. You may consider yourself fortunate in having been taken on by him."

"I owe it all to you," said Maurice grate-

fully. "I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you for what you have done."

"Don't mention it," the other returned. "I am always very glad to do what I can for Davidson. He proved himself a true friend to me when I wanted help badly, and now I'm only doing a little to repay the obligation in another way."

When they had searched almost every hotel in the town they eventually discovered the individual who had the horses for sale. He admitted that he was desirous of disposing of the animals, and, borrowing a buggy from a friend, drove them to the suburbs of the town, where the horses were grazing. They were certainly not beautiful, and totally unlike the hacks Maurice had been accustomed to ride in the Row. However, they were staunch sort of beasts, and, as their owner remarked, "couldn't be beaten on camp between Bourke and the Gulf." What he meant Maurice did not know, but he did not show his ignorance. Then the bargaining commenced. Eventually the man was induced to dispose of the two for twenty pounds, and to throw in a bridle and saddle, a pack saddle and fittings for five pounds more. He also agreed to deliver the horses at Maurice's hotel

that afternoon. Their deal being completed, they drove back to the Township, and Maurice made his way to the Pastoral Hotel, to inform Manton of his success. The latter had seen many friends in the meantime, and was in the best of humours. He vowed that he would turn Maurice into a first-rate bushman inside of a week, and in guarantee of this assertion, presented him with a stockwhip he had purchased that morning, with which he averred he could pick out the eye of a mosquito at ten feet three times in succession. Maurice took this curious instrument of flagellation in his hand, and looked at it in some bewilderment. The handle was not more than a foot long, the thong being about fifteen.

"Some day I'll show you how to use a real gully raker," observed Manton. "You shall learn the Sydney flash and the Warrego curler before you see Bourke again."

Maurice felt as if his head were going round. He had imagined the Bush to be a primitive place; but every moment he was learning something fresh. Who among all the clever men of his old life could discriminate between a Sydney flash and a Warrego curler? At Manton's request, he remained to lunch with him, and ere the meal was at an end, he had

come to some sort of understanding of his future employer's character. What was more, he felt sure that he should like him. The man was a mass of vain good nature. He could be a firm friend, but it was also plain that he could be a very bitter enemy. Once during the meal he chanced upon a subject that almost roused Maurice to expostulation. The name of Mr Sherrard was mentioned.

"Joe Sherrard of Wockatonga?" cried Manton. "If I don't know him, nobody else does. Why he's the meanest man this side of Sydney. I took a mob down for him once from one of his Queensland Stations, but I'll never take another job for him as long as I live. That man's so mean that he'd scrape the blacking off your boots to shine his own with."

For a moment Maurice felt inclined, as I have said, to retaliate with something sharp in defence of the man who had been kind to him; but a moment's reflection showed him the uselessness of so doing. Mr Sherrard was quite able to take care of himself, and whatever he might have said would not have been likely to have influenced Manton in the condition he was then in. Later in the afternoon he returned to the hotel, at which

he had stayed on the previous night, and took over his horses. The vendor showed him how to adjust his pack saddle, and gave him certain other hints concerning the habits of the two steeds, which proved valuable to him. When, therefore, he rode round to the Pastoral Hotel next morning, mounted on Tommy, the bay, and leading Billy, the chestnut, he would have been a sharp individual who could have detected the fact that he was a new comer to the Bush.

Half-an-hour later Manton was ready, and when he had mounted a somewhat raking-looking brown, which he declared to be the best "cutting-out horse" in Australia, they took the road.

The second act of Maurice Ogilvie's Australian career had commenced.

CHAPTER VII

IN something under a month Manton's little party had reached Morendu Station on the Diamantina River. They had travelled over three hundred miles by the time they arrived there, and during that time Maurice had learnt many things which were destined to be of the greatest importance to him in the near future. All things taken into consideration he found it by no means an unpleasant occupation, and, when once he had settled down to it, he felt as if he had followed it all his life.

On arriving at the Station, they found the cattle ready for taking over. A mob, consisting of some seven hundred beasts, had been collected, and on the day after their arrival, Manton announced the fact that he was prepared to commence his journey to the South. Three other men, who had been enjoying a holiday in Brisbane, had come out to join them, and these,

with Maurice and Sailor Jim, the cook, to say nothing of two black boys, Rocca and Wiora, completed the party.

On the night before they left Morendu, they sat round the camp fire discussing the prospects of the long journey that lay before them. It had been an excellent season, and for this reason they knew that grass and water would be plentiful. As Maurice sat on his blankets, pipe in mouth, and his toes toasting at the fire, while the flames leaped up and threw strange lights and shadows among the trees overhead, and the wind sighed through the long grass beside the lagoon, he could not refrain from contrasting the life he was then leading with that of the fashionable young man about town. He wondered whether he would ever see any of his old companions again, and if so whether they would recognize him. So far, Harbridge was the only person who had guessed at his identity, and he told himself if he remained in the Bush and did not go out of his way to attract attention, it was scarcely likely that any one would do so.

It was barely light next morning when Manton roused them from their slumbers.

A heavy mist hid the lagoon, and the sky, where it could be seen, was as pale a grey as the inside of an oyster shell. At the moment that Maurice opened his eyes a flock of *Galas* in a tree near at hand had evidently just arrived at the conclusion that another day had commenced, and, that it would be as well for them to go in search of breakfast. The camp fire, that had burnt so cheerily the night before, was now only a heap of grey ash, but Sailor Jim was hard at work upon the wood-pile close at hand, and in a very few minutes it would be alight.

"Come, my lads, up with you," cried Manton, shaking by the shoulders those who felt inclined to doze again. "There's no time to be lost. Rocca and you, Wiora, go on after the horses, and run them up to the small yard behind the store. After that come back and get your breakfasts."

The black boys accordingly departed in search of the animals, while the rest of the party stretched themselves in their blankets preparatory to rising. It was by no means warm, but a brisk run down to the lagoon and a dip in the cold water soon remedied matters, and by the time breakfast was ready there was not a man who did not feel

inclined for it. Here it might be placed on record that there was not a better man than Sailor Jim in his special line of cooking. For dampers, Johnny cakes, plum duff, he had not his equal. To do a hard day's work, and to come back to camp to sit down to one of his meals, was to know what good-living should be. As soon as they had finished their breakfast the black boys went off to harness two of the horses into the ration cart and to bring it into the camp. Thereupon the swags were stowed away, together with the hobbles, ropes, camp ovens, pans, and all the other paraphernalia of a drover's outfit

When everything was ready, Manton came up and inspected the load.

"Now off you go, Jim," he said to the cook. "Keep the creek on your left-hand till you come to Sandy Crossing. Then cross and follow the track to Sugar Loaf Hill. We'll spell there for an hour at midday. You can pull up under the big gum that was struck by lightning when we were out here in '83"

Sailor Jim signified by a nod that he understood, and immediately started his team. When they had seen him disappear round

the bend of the lagoon, the rest of the party made their way to the stockyard, where their horses were awaiting them. They were all in the pink of condition ; neither too fat nor too lean, but just of the fettle to enter upon the work that lay before them. The animals that were to be ridden that day having been selected, the rest were driven to the end of the paddock, where the mob they were to take over was waiting, in charge of the Station hands. Manton had already received his papers, and had given his receipt, so that nothing remained now but to start the beasts on their long journey to the South.

Now, every man who has tried his hand at Overlanding will tell you that a green mob is by no means an easy thing to handle. The beasts know their own country, and have no desire to move off it. They are quite unused to being driven, and, as a natural result, they make it a point of honour to break away on every possible opportunity. To give them a better start, half-a-dozen of the Station men accompanied them for the first day's stage, and remained to share the night's watch. After the cattle had been started next day they were comparatively

easy to manage. One of the herd elected himself king, and from that day forward was to be seen leading like the born ruler he was.

Their route for the first seven days lay through thickly timbered country, running parallel with a noble range of hills. Grass and water were plentiful, and for green beasts the animals were behaving themselves remarkably well.

On the eighth day they crossed the Ranges and camped at night beside a big water-hole, on an open plain. It was left to Sailor Jim to decide upon the camp, and for this reason he always travelled five or six miles ahead.

According to custom they boxed the cattle on the plain, and then drove them down to water. When the animals had drunk their fill, the black boys tailed them on to camp, where one of the lads stood watch while the others had their tea.

After the meal the fire was replenished, and long after darkness had fallen they sat around it, smoking and yarning. Overhead the stars twinkled brightly, and away in a gully, in the Ranges they had crossed that day, a wild dog was calling to his mate.

"Roll that log into the fire, Patterson," said Manton, pointing to a log that lay near Maurice's blankets. "For all we know to the contrary, it may be full of centipedes."

Maurice did as he was directed, and soon the wood was well alight, and sending a volley of sparks into the darkness.

"Rum things centipedes," said Harry the Digger, pressing the tobacco into his pipe with the top of his little finger as he spoke. "I knew a chap at Bendigo, a schoolmaster, who used to collect 'em and bottle 'em. He called it Science, but other folk called it madness. By the time he had finished he had a rare lot of 'em, of all sorts and sizes. One day he forgot to put the cork in, and the bottle was upset."

"What happened?"

"They got him. He never collected centipedes again. He'd run if you only showed him one."

"That reminds me of a man I knew on the Murrumbidgee," said Three-Fingered Dick, who never liked to be outdone in a story. "He lost as fine a wife as any one could clap eyes on, and, what's more, with a couple of thousand pounds at her back, just by reason of taking her out for a walk one

Sunday afternoon, and a sittin' her down on an old gum log. She had been there about five minutes when she was bitten by a centipede on the calf of her leg. The duffer wouldn't go away when she gave him the hint, but must needs stay alongside, talking about poetry and all that sort of stuff, when she wanted to be investigating. She fainted clean off at last, and he had to carry her home. She was that disgusted with his foolishness that she would have nothing more to do with him, but went and married a publican down on the Wentworth side."

Ten minutes or so later, the man who had been on the watch came in, and it was Maurice's turn to take his place. Catching his night horse, he mounted and rode out to where the mob was grazing quietly on the plain. The moon had just made its appearance above the Ranges, and the night was very still. As he kept a watchful eye on his charges, he found himself reviewing his Past. What a wasted life his had been up to that time!

After a time his thoughts turned to other people. From one to another they passed, until they at last reached Miss Sherrard.

He pictured her as he had so often seen her, seated under the awning of the *Fotheringay*. He recalled the day when she had spoken to him concerning the whale that had risen so mysteriously near the ship's side. In all probability, he told himself, she had forgotten that such a person existed, yet he had not forgotten her. The memory of her sweet voice and pretty face was more pleasant to him than he could say.

"Ah!" he mused to himself, when he thought over the matter, "there was once a time when I could have met her as an equal, and have done my best to win her. Now, however—— But, there! What would she think of me if she knew of the awful crime of which the world believes me guilty?"

For the remainder of his days, he reflected, he must be an outcast, afraid to bear his own name, and never knowing when a hand might be placed upon his shoulder, and he himself be made a prisoner.

His watch at an end, he rode leisurely up to the camp, and having dismounted woke Three-Fingered Dick, who was to take his place. Then, when he had tethered his horse, he curled himself up in his blankets

and endeavoured to sleep. For the first time since he had been in the Bush, however, he found himself unable to do so. He had not been feeling particularly well for two days, and that night an intense melancholy had settled itself upon him, and, do what he would, he could not shake it off. He was still awake when Sailor Jim began to kindle his fire, preparatory to cooking the morning's breakfast. Feeling that it was no use remaining where he was, in the condition he was then in, he got up and helped the other.

During the morning Manton, for the first time, saw that there was something really wrong with him. He accordingly rode up alongside.

"What's the matter with you, Patterson?" he inquired. "You've a face as long as a fiddle."

"I'm sorry to hear it," said Maurice, with a forced laugh. "I've got a fit of the blues, I suppose. I trust it will soon work off, however."

Unfortunately the fit did not work off as he had predicted. Indeed, his spirits sank lower and lower as their journey progressed. Once more he slept no better than he had

done on the previous night. In vain he tried to reason it out with himself, in the hope that he would be able to convince himself that there was really no sort of reason why he should be so miserable. Who would be likely to recognise in William Patterson, the drover of Australia, the once fashionable Sir Maurice Ogilvie, of the West End of London.

Towards the end of the day's march his condition grew gradually worse. What it was that ailed him he could not tell. He said nothing about it, however, to his comrades, but performed his share of the work as though he were enjoying his usual good health.

Another bad night's rest set the seal upon him, and when the order was given to march on the following day, he moved towards his horse like an old man. The effort to mount proved too much for him, and after two unsuccessful attempts to reach the saddle, he fell backwards in a dead faint upon the ground. Manton and Three-Fingered Dick immediately hastened to his assistance, but it was some time before they were able to restore him to consciousness. It having been agreed that he was not in a condition to

ride that day, a place was found for him in the ration cart. At midday he was much worse, and by nightfall Manton was beginning to grow seriously alarmed.

"I wonder what is the best thing to do with him?" he asked of his companions. "It's certain he can't go on like this, and we're more than twenty miles from the Township."

"There is a hospital there," said Sailor Jim, who knew the locality well. "If he isn't better in the morning we'd best get him there as soon as may be."

Maurice certainly was not better next morning. If there were a change at all, it was for the worse. By midday he was delirious. The accumulated troubles of the past six weeks were wreaking their vengeance upon him. This being so there seemed nothing for it but to hurry the cattle forward for a few miles, and then to transport the sufferer, by means of Sailor Jim's wagon, to the Township of Barrambah.

By nightfall Maurice's connexion with Manton's Overlanding party had ceased, and he was lying in a galvanised iron hut, which represents a hospital in the Township of Barrambah. Fortunately for him the doctor engaged by the

Committee at that time was a gentleman of some attainments. He was, moreover, an enthusiast in his profession, and having had nothing to occupy him for some time save a few broken limbs he entered upon Maurice's case with a zeal that was beyond all praise. For more than a fortnight the latter's life trembled in the balance, and during that time a close friendship sprang up between the two men.

"Whoever the fellow is, or was," said the doctor to himself on one occasion, "he is no ordinary man. I'll warrant he's been a bigger swell in his day than I have ever been, or ever shall be. And yet the people who brought him here entered his name as William Patterson. However, I don't suppose a name counts for very much in this part of the world. It's not the first of his class I've had to do with."

Five weeks later Maurice was convalescent, though he was about as sorry a specimen of the genus man as could be found in the length and breadth of the Australian Bush. He had shrunk from his former robust self to a mere shadow. Indeed, one would not have recognized in him the well set-up young man who had trotted out of Bourke, in com-

pany with the redoubtable Dick Manton, so short a time before.

Barrambah Bush Hospital is not the sort of place to whose mercies one would entrust the welfare of a delicate invalid. Whatever else it may be, however, it was certainly a haven, both of refuge and of healing for Maurice. He could not have been more carefully tended had he had his choice of all the great London Hospitals. Doctor Fairfield, for this was the medico's name, did his work as a labour of love, and, believe me, there can be no more faithful service.

"I began to think we were going to plant you in the field they dignify by the name of Cemetery, out yonder," he said to Maurice one day as they sat in the verandah of the hospital. "You have had a narrow escape, but, by Jove! you've pulled through marvellously, and in another week's time, if all goes well, I hope to set you on your feet once more."

"I'm sure I'm extremely obliged to you for all your trouble," Maurice replied. "I am afraid, however, it has been wasted. What I am going to do when I am about again, I don't know. I had a splendid billet

with Manton, and have lost it through this illness "

"There are plenty of others, just as good to be had," said the other, comfortingly. "Wait until you are really fit to be at work again, and I'll see what I can do for you. I'm necessarily familiar with most of the owner's hereabouts, and I feel that if any one can get them to give you a lift, I am that man "

More than once during his convalescence Maurice experienced the agonising fear that in his delirium he might have dropped some hint of his past life. When, however, the days went by and the good little doctor said nothing to him on the subject, he gained heart.

One day, however, with Machiavelian subtlety, he led the conversation with the hospital attendant, a tall, thin, cadaverous man, with a demeanour that made him not unlike Uriah Heap, into the channel he wanted. In an airy manner they discussed great crimes and criminals, and Maurice, to his relief, was able to convince himself that the other had heard nothing from him concerning the famous Plantagenet murder.

"They want a new storekeeper out at

Borrilah," said the medico to Maurice, about ten days later. "Why don't you try for it? I saw the head overseer in the Township last night, and put in a good word for you so, if you care to go out there, I think you will very probably get the job."

Maurice determined to do so, and in the morning mounted his horse, which Manton had left behind, and with Billy, the pack-horse, set off for the station in question. He was too late to obtain the storekeeper's place, but he was taken on as an ordinary hand. He kept this position for three months, during which time he added daily to his experience. Then the death of the owner threw him upon the world once more, after which he drifted from Station to Station for upwards of a year, getting work where and how he could. His intention was, if possible, to discover Manton once more, and, if he would have him, to join him again on one of his Overlanding trips. Eventually he left Queensland, crossed the Border and found himself in New South Wales. Then, in the township of Rongonilla, another serious illness laid him low, and when he rose from his bed, a month later, he was but little better than a skeleton.

After leaving Rongonilla he made his way further into New South Wales, until he found himself in Mr. Sherrard's country. He remembered the promise Mr Sherrard had made him aboard the *Fotheringay*, and he accordingly determined to go to the Head Station in order to see what luck would do for him upon his endeavouring to obtain a situation there.

On a certain hot morning he quitted the Township at which he had spent the night, and, following the directions he had been given, turned off at the Cross Tracks in the Mulga, three miles or so beyond the Government Well

"The Station is fifteen miles from here, they say," he muttered to himself, as he left the sandy main track, and branched off on what was little better than a cattle path. "In that case if all goes well I should hit it by midday."

In the timber the heat was overpowering, but he plodded steadily on. Later the track entirely vanished, and he was compelled to steer by dead reckoning. He climbed hill after hill and crossed valley after valley, but the Mulga remained with him, apparently growing thicker with every mile he pro-

gressed. Hour after hour he toiled on, but still no sign of a Station could he see. The sun sank lower above the tree-tops, yet there was no sign either of water or of the buildings he was so anxious to reach. What was worse, with unpardonable carelessness, he had neglected to fill his water-bag before he left the Township that morning, and in consequence his tongue was parched with thirst.

After he had been walking for several hours he looked up and saw before him a curious sandstone rock. He remembered that he had encountered one like it already that morning, and had been struck by its resemblance to a horse's head. He recalled the fact that while resting beneath its shade, he had put in the eye of the animal with his knife. Half fearing what he might find, he walked towards it. Then he was filled with a terror that shook him to the very centre of his being. He looked at the rock again, and knew his fate. No, there could be no doubt about it. He was bushed! He had not advanced a yard upon his journey! *He had been wandering in a circle all day!*

CHAPTER VIII

BUSHED ! Only those who have realized the true meaning of that word can possibly appreciate the terror that took possession of Maurice when he arrived at an understanding of the fate that had befallen him. His tongue was parched, he was weary, almost to the point of dropping, and, though he had walked upwards of fifteen miles, it had been needless labour, seeing that he had been travelling all the time in one huge circle. More than once since he had been in Australia he had had stories told him concerning the fate of men who had perished by means of this mysterious affliction. He was well aware that it was characteristic of the same that the wanderer should invariably proceed in a circle, finding himself, time after time, returning to the place whence he had originally set out. As may be supposed, such thoughts were of a nature calculated to fill him with a fear such as he had never known

in his life before. He had faced death too often by this time to have any great dread of its terrors. It is one thing, however, to perish, shall we say, by falling from a yard-arm in a gale, or to be thrown from a maddened horse, or to die quietly in one's bed, as becomes a respectable citizen. It is quite another, however, to meet one's end, wandering helplessly onward, falling one moment, and staggering to one's feet again the next, to eventually die of exhaustion like a starving sheep.

Advanced though the day was, Maurice picked up his swag and once more commenced his weary march. This time he determined that he would take more care, that he would not fall into the same mistakes he had made on the previous settings out. He took the points of the compass from the setting sun, and strove to remember the instructions he had been given as to the course he should steer in order to reach Mr. Sherrard's station. He felt sure, if he could only rivet his attention on the business before him, that he could not fail to go right. After that he pushed steadily on until it became too dark to go further. Then he remembered what Manton had so often said to him: "If ever

you find yourself bushed at the end of a day, the safest plan is to halt and camp for the night." This he now determined to do.

How Maurice spent that night I don't think he would be able to tell you. Although his health had been in a great measure restored to him, he was not in a condition to endure the amount of fatigue he had been able to endure before his illness. He had travelled twenty miles that day at the lowest calculation, and under the most trying conditions. Yet his greatest difficulty now was to subdue the wild craving to push on. Sleep, the merciful, however, eventually intervened, and for a few hours, at least, he forgot his miseries. He dreamt that he was back once more in England, walking through the meadows of his old home. At last he reached the river, the same old river in which, in happier days, he had so often fished and bathed. How cool and inviting the water looked! He knelt upon the bank to bathe his feverish brow, but, lo! even as he put his hand out to it, the water fell away from him and disappeared like a mirage! Then he awoke, to find himself lying on the hard ground in the thick scrub. He had spent the night just as he had fallen, without even

unrolling his blankets. He turned to his water-bag, as if in the faint hope that it might happen to contain some fluid—if only a mouthful. It was as dry, however, as the ground on which he lay. Then he rose and noticed the position of the sun, which was to be seen over the tops of the mulga trees. His route, so far as he could remember, was due East, so picking up his swag, and carrying the empty water-bag in his hand, in the hope that he might find a pool at which to fill it, he once more set out in search of the Station. For some hours he plodded on, the scrub continuing as thick as ever it had been. Again he climbed hill after hill, and descended dip after dip, until the sun had risen to the mid-heaven. At this period the heat was well-nigh unbearable.

Look where he would, not a sign of water could he discover; his tongue was swollen, until it seemed as if his mouth would scarcely contain it; his skin was parched and dry; while his eyes burnt in their sockets like coals of fire.

“Surely I cannot be far from the Station now,” he muttered to himself at last.

Then, horror of horrors! he thought he detected a likeness in the hill he was ascend-

ing to that on which he had camped. A very few moments were sufficient to confirm this suspicion. On his right was the spot where he had fallen exhausted, on the left the tree with the curiously-shaped limb that had seemed to him, in the half dawn, to present some likeness to the face of Mr. Gladstone.

Having convinced himself, he gazed about him in a dazed fashion, as if he were aware that he was in trouble, yet scarcely realized what it meant to him. Without attempting to grasp its possibilities, however, he entered upon the stage that invariably precedes the end. He discarded his roll of blankets and the water-bag, and then, with tottering steps, he once more commenced his hopeless march. The birds in the branches of the trees above mocked at him, and for some distance an ominous crow gave him doleful company. At last overtaxed nature could stand the strain no longer, and with a moan he fell to the ground unconscious.

How long he lay there he will never be able to tell, but when his senses returned to him the sun had disappeared, and it was half dark among the trees. Some one was kneeling beside him, bathing his forehead with a wet



"She lifted his head, and held the cup to his lips"

Connie Birt]

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handkerchief. This some one was a girl, and in the chaotic state of his mind at that moment, it seemed only in the proper order of things that she should be Miss Sherrard. In a dazed sort of fashion he told himself that her image was only a creation of his fancy, and that in a few seconds his agony would come back, and that her figure would vanish, never to return. This view of the case certainly seemed to be borne out by the evidence, for when he closed his eyes and opened them again, after an interval of some minutes, she was missing. Yet, as if to argue for the other side, there was a horse tethered to a neighbouring tree, and, what was more, it had undoubtedly a lady's saddle upon its back. Maurice was too weak to undertake the task of puzzling the question out, so he laid himself down again and waited to see what would happen. It was not long before the sound of a brisk footstep reached his ears, and when he looked up it was to see the girl returning to his side. She carried a white enamel cup of water in her hand. Kneeling beside him, she lifted his head and held the cup to his lips. Then he realized that it was no dream after all.

Never will any drink taste so sweet to

him as did that one. The finest wine the world has ever produced could not have equalled it. It gave him back his life, and more than life.

"How did you manage to find me?" he asked, in a voice that he scarcely recognized as his own, so husky was it.

"I crossed your tracks some distance back," the girl replied. "I could see them quite distinctly on the sands of what we call 'Desolation Hill.' Immediately I looked at them I came to the conclusion that you were *bushed*, and so followed them up. It was as well for you, perhaps, that I did."

"You have saved my life," he answered. "I was completely done for. I had been wandering in circles since yesterday afternoon."

"You are not the first who has lost himself in the mulga scrub," she replied. "I am very thankful that I found you. Were you trying to reach my father's Station?"

"That was my desire. I thought, perhaps, Miss Sherrard, that if I did, even if your father were not there, his manager might possibly be able to find me some employment."

"You call me Miss Sherrard! How do

you happen to know my name? I have not been up here a week!"

From this Maurice realized that she had not recognized him.

"I remember you very well," he replied. "But it is scarcely likely you would recollect me. I was a sailor on the ship that brought you from England. Your father was kind enough to promise me work if I called at his office in Sydney. I did not do so, however."

"Ah! now I understand," she cried, in real astonishment. "Your name is Patterson. But how ill you look! What have you been doing with yourself?"

"I have been laid up in Rongonilla for more than a month," he answered. "Some time before that, when I was with an Over-landing party, I was taken ill, and they were compelled to go on and leave me behind. I've neither had luck nor health since. All things considered, I don't know that it wouldn't have been better if you had not chanced upon me to-day. It would certainly have been a case of another useless man out of the way."

"You must not talk like that," she returned. "You have, doubtless, been unfor-

tunate in the Past, but you don't know what the Future may have in store for you Now drink some more of this water, and then see if you can manage to get on to your feet. We are not four miles from the Head Station now, and unless we desire to remain where we are all night we must try to reach it before darkness falls "

Maurice drank the water she gave him, and then endeavoured to obey her second order. When she saw him move, however, she realized that he was far too weak to walk

" You can't manage it," she said " You'll have to ride my horse while I lead him."

At first Maurice would not hear of this, but Miss Sherrard would countenance no refusal.

" If you don't do as I tell you," she said, " you'll put me to the trouble of going to the Head Station and bringing back a cart to fetch you They would not know where to find you, and I should have to guide them. It would be far better to do as I say. A four miles' walk is nothing to me Climb upon that stump and I'll back the horse to you "

Seeing that it was useless attempting to

resist her, Maurice did as he was directed. and a few seconds later they had started off.

They proceeded some distance in silence. Miss Sherrard was the first to speak.

"Papa will indeed be surprised to see you," she said. "He would have been with me when I found you, had not one of the overseers called him off to inspect a new dam they are building in another paddock half-a-dozen miles away."

"It never crossed my mind that I should find you in this district at all," Maurice observed. "I had no idea that you spent any of your life in the Bush"

"We visit each of our stations once every year," she replied. "I am very fond of a Bush life"

"But are you not afraid, when you're out alone like this, that you may be overtaken by the fate from which you have so providentially rescued me this afternoon?"

"Oh dear, no," she answered, with a merry laugh. "I'm far too good a bushman to be caught like that. I can find my way anywhere—much better even than papa."

More than once during the next few miles Maurice endeavoured to persuade Miss Sher-

rard to allow him to walk. But she would not hear of it.

"You wouldn't be able to travel a hundred yards in an hour," she said "And you know that would not do for either of us. You must remain where you are now. We have not more than a mile to go"

This statement proved to be correct, for when they left the scrub and emerged on to the plain, the Head Station could be distinctly seen. Eventually they reached the gate of the small paddock in front of the house Maurice dismounted and opened it for Miss Sherrard and the horse to pass through. As he did so he saw the owner come into the verandah of the manager's residence and watch them. They crossed the small paddock and came to a halt at the steps of the house.

"Why, Nina, my dear, where on earth have you been, and what have you been doing?" inquired Mr Sherrard. "And who is this man?"

"Do you remember Mr. Patterson, papa, on board the *Fotheringay*?"

She knew he was a gentleman, and for that reason she endowed him with the prefix.

"Of course I remember him," returned the squatter. "But I doubt if I should have known you again as you are now," he continued, addressing Maurice. "What is the reason of it all?"

Maurice replied as briefly as possible, and expressed the gratitude he felt for the services Miss Sherrard had rendered him.

"Well, it was indeed lucky for you that my daughter happened to come across your tracks," Mr. Sherrard answered. "And still luckier that she was a sufficiently good bushman to be able to read their meaning. Now go in, Nina, my dear," he added, "and leave Patterson to me. I'll take care of him."

The girl nodded cordially to Maurice, and then handed her horse's reins to her father. Having done so she disappeared into the house.

"Come with me, Patterson," said Mr. Sherrard. "You are done up and the sooner you're in bed the better."

So saying, he led Maurice round the corner of the house to a long, low building, known as the Barracks. Calling up a hand he despatched him with his daughter's horse to the stables, after which he introduced

Maurice to the living-room, round which the various cubicles of the overseers and Jackeroos (as the Colonial experiencers are somewhat discourteously termed), were arranged. Several men, some of them reading, others playing cards, and all smoking, were seated at the long table in the centre of the room. They one and all rose as their employer entered, and most of them stared with some astonishment at his companion. To them his appearance was more suggestive of the men's hut, than the overseers' room.

"I've brought you a new mess-mate," Mr. Sherrard began. "Find him a bed if you can. He has had the misfortune to get bushed in the Mulga, and it has given him rather a shock. Make yourself as comfortable as possible, Patterson, and I'll come down and have a look at you later on. I must say that you have changed for the worse since I last saw you on board the *Fotheringay*. I hope, however, it won't be long before you're yourself once more."

After he had given a few directions to the head overseer, Mr. Sherrard bade Maurice good-bye and returned to the house.

The latter's life at Wockatunga might be said to have commenced from that moment.

For the next two or three days Maurice was not fit for very much. Gradually, however, his strength came back to him, and by the time he was able to enter upon his duties as second overseer, which post happened to be vacant at the time, he was feeling as well as he had ever done in his life.

Of pretty Miss Nina he obtained occasional glimpses. She spent most of her time in the saddle, riding with her father about the Run, and helping and advising him with a clearness of perception, and an eye to the needs of the Future, that was little short of extraordinary.

"You should have been a boy, Nina," her father remarked to her once in Maurice's hearing. They were inspecting some improvements that had been made in the woolshed, and she had made certain practical suggestions. "You seem to know just what is wanted in a moment, and to be able to give us an idea of it. What do you think, Patterson?"

Thus appealed to, Maurice had no option but to answer that he quite agreed with his employer. His eye rested admiringly, meanwhile, on the neat figure in its well-

cut habit, with the point of one shapely foot peeping out from beneath the skirt. She sat her animal with the grace of a born horsewoman, and, as Maurice was well aware, there were times when he was by no means an easy beast to manage.

As for the young man himself, the month he had been on the station had wrought a wondrous change in his appearance. His cheeks had filled, his eyes had lost their lack-lustre expression, and, moreover, he had had his hair cut and his beard trimmed by one of the hands, who at one time, so it was declared, had been a fashionable Melbourne hairdresser. With the manager, his fellow-overseers, and the bulk of the men, Maurice proved exceedingly popular, while his employer very soon declared that, in taking him into his service, he had done a by no means bad stroke of business.

"People may say what they please," said the latter to his daughter one evening after Maurice had left the verandah, whither he had been summoned to make a report concerning the water supply of a certain paddock. "But there's a mystery about Patterson Beddoes told me, only yesterday, that the night before last, when they were

camped on the river, he let slip the fact that he had been a guest at Sandringham. I suppose, however, he wasted his fortune, got into disgrace, and was obliged to leave England for good and all."

Nina had taken the man in question under her protection, and she did not intend to hear anything detrimental to his character

"I don't think he is the sort of man to disgrace himself, papa," she returned. "He is too much of a gentleman for that."

"Unfortunately it's very often the so-called gentlemen who do those sort of things," her father replied. "I should be sorry, however, to hear anything against Patterson. I have taken a great liking to the man. He certainly does his work excellently, and they say the men will do anything for him."

A few evenings later, and just when they had finished supper in the Barracks, the mail-coach rolled up to the station. It was the custom for the bag to be opened in the verandah of the manager's house, and for the overseers and Jackeroos to attend there to receive their letters. Sometimes Maurice accompanied them, though he knew, only too well, that there would never be anything for him. Harbridge was not ac-

quainted with his whereabouts, and Manton had no knowledge of what became of him after he had left the hospital at Barambah.

On this occasion the mail proved to be a heavy one. With the exception of Maurice, all the men present had either a paper, or letter to receive.

"I'm sorry I can't find anything for you, Patterson," said Mr. Sherrard, jocularly, as he handed the last letter to one of the overseers. "You must really tell your correspondents to do their duty towards you. You haven't received a single letter since you've been up here."

At this moment Miss Sherrard stole a glance at the young man's face and saw how pale it had suddenly become. However, he managed to utter some reply, and then walked away with the others.

Later in the evening Maurice strolled towards the men's hut to give an order for the morrow. As he passed the wicket-gate of the manager's garden he was surprised to find Miss Sherrard standing beside it. He raised his hat politely as he approached her.

"What a lovely evening it is," she observed. "I don't think I have ever seen a

finer sunset, even in Australia, than we have had to night. What is your opinion concerning the prospects of the weather?"

"I think we are in for a dry spell," Maurice answered. "Indeed, all things considered, we are just as well without rain—for a time at least."

There was a silence that lasted for upwards of half a minute.

"Mr. Patterson," said Miss Sherrard at last, "I'm going to be very rude. I feel that I must say how sorry I am that papa hurt your feelings this afternoon. I think you know as well as I do that he would not knowingly cause any one pain."

"I'm afraid I do not understand you," Maurice replied. "In what way do you suppose your father hurt my feelings?"

"By joking with you about the omissions of your correspondents," she returned, with some embarrassment. "I am going to ask you to forgive him and me."

"There is nothing to forgive," he answered. "If I led you to suppose that I was pained, be sure it was quite unintentional. Why should I be troubled at not receiving letters? No one I knew in the Past knows where I am, so how could they write to me? Be-

sides, I have put all that sort of sentiment behind me for ever and a day. To have letters would only be to re-open the old wounds, which are now, thank Heaven, almost healed ! ”

She noticed how bitterly he spoke, and her heart was touched.

“ But, Mr. Patterson,” she returned, almost timidly, “ is your case really so hopeless ? You are only a young man. You should still have a long life before you. Will you never be able to go back to England ? ”

“ Never ! ” he answered “ If I live to be a hundred, my bones will be laid in Australian soil.”

“ Oh ! I cannot tell you how sorry I am for you,” she replied softly. “ But surely something can be done ? ”

“ Nothing. I have taught myself to understand that the old life is done with. Pray do not distress yourself unnecessarily about me. Believe me, I am not worthy of your pity.”

“ But you are not unhappy now ? ”

“ No I am happier here than I have been since my childhood ” he answered. “ I like my work, and it is comforting to feel that at last I am doing something useful

in the world. I am more than thankful to you for your sympathy, Miss Sherrard."

"There is no need for you to be, I am sure I wish I could do more to help you."

"You could not do more than you have done," said Maurice, and then bade her good-night.

On the Wednesday of the week following, Mr. Sherrard and his daughter said farewell to the Station, and set off on their return journey to Civilisation. Maurice did not see them start, but encountered the buggy on his rounds, and pulled up to open a gate for them, and to bid them farewell.

"Good-bye, Patterson," said Mr. Sherrard, who was driving. "As I told you the other day, I am very glad to have you in my employ. When you take your holiday, if you care about doing so, and should visit Sydney, don't forget to give us a call. You know our address, and I can assure you we shall be very pleased to see you."

"Good-bye also," said Miss Sherrard, and as she said it she leant forward and held out her hand to the young man

"Good-bye," he returned; "I cannot tell you how thankful I am to you and your father for your goodness to me."

Then the carriage proceeded on its way, and was soon lost to view round a curve of the track

Three months later, for the first time since he had been on the Station, a letter was handed to Maurice. It proved to be from Mr. Sherrard, and it offered him the post of Chief Overseer at Marakandah.

"You're in luck, Patterson," said the manager, who had taken a great liking to the young Englishman. "It's the finest of all his Properties, and one of the most comfortable homesteads in Queensland. You ought now to be as happy as the day is long"

"I wonder if she obtained it for me?" said Maurice to himself as he made his way back to his quarters, in order to write a letter thanking Mr. Sherrard for his kindness and accepting the position

CHAPTER IX

As Maurice soon discovered, when he reached Marakandah, his late manager had not deceived him when he said that the station in question was a fine property. Its area was upwards of a thousand square miles, and it was capable of carrying in a good season between three and four hundred thousand sheep. The house was situated on the banks of the river, and was a charming building, with a broad, creeper-covered verandah, and a garden that ran down to the water's edge. The manager himself was a married man, and had been for many years in Mr. Sherrard's employment. There were four overseers, six Jackeroos, and a large number of hands. From the moment he first caught sight of it from the track on the hill, Maurice took a liking to the place. By the time he had spent a year there he felt as if he should never wish to leave it again. With one exception he agreed ex-

cellently with his fellow-workers. That exception was the man who had expected to receive the post that he, Maurice, occupied. He was a small, dark man, Australian born and bred, a good hand with stock; but, as Maurice soon had good reason to know, possessed of an extremely vindictive temperament. In numberless little ways he endeavoured to prejudice Maurice in the manager's eyes, but the latter, on each occasion, saw through the ruse, and the attempt only recoiled upon its creator's head.

"I don't know why the fellow should try to make matters so uncomfortable for me," said the young man to himself one day, when Snelling—for that was the individual's name—had proved more than usually exasperating. "He would have taken the billet had he been in my place, and I don't see that it was my fault the owner overlooked him."

During the year that followed Maurice's arrival at Marakandah, Mr Sherrard did not once visit the Station, and, in consequence, as Maurice had no desire to leave, he neither saw nor heard anything of Miss Nina. Then a terrible event occurred which was destined to have far-reaching results.

Towards dusk one wintry afternoon, Mr. Drayton, the manager, was driving back from the inspection of a new line of fencing that was to cut up a paddock, which, in every one's opinion, had hitherto been too large for profitable working. They were more than half-way home when Maurice, who was riding ahead, and was about to take a short cut for the homestead, heard a cry, and, turning in his saddle, saw, to his horror, that the spirited pair of horses, the manager was driving, had bolted, and were dashing across the open country in the direction of the river. The man who had accompanied Mr. Drayton was still standing at the gate he had got out to open, staring helplessly at the quickly vanishing vehicle. It was a terrible moment, for the horses had frightened each other, and were now like mad creatures, and, as Maurice remembered, the river's edge, for which they were making, was really more like a cliff than a bank. Moreover, the stream was in full flood.

Putting spurs to his horse Maurice galloped after the runaways, but it soon became apparent to him that he could do nothing to avert the catastrophe. With every stride

the horses were drawing nearer the abyss. Then he saw Mr. Drayton stand up as if with the intention of leaping out, but before he could do so, the animals had reached the edge of the bank and disappeared. When Maurice arrived at the place, the river, some sixty feet below, was rolling along as placidly as if nothing out of the common had occurred. That night the body of one of the horses was washed ashore near the wool-shed, though how the animal managed to extricate itself from its harness no one could tell. That of the other was found several weeks afterwards, when the river fell, pinned down by the carriage at the foot of the cliff. For three days, though search was made on both banks, and for many miles below the station, no trace could be found of the body of Mr. Drayton. Eventually it was discovered by a boundary rider in a billabong off the main stream.

As he was now practically in charge Maurice despatched a messenger with a telegram to Mr Sherrard informing him of what had taken place, and asking for instructions. The reply he received was to the effect that he was to consider himself manager *pro tem*, and that the owner him-

self would come up to the property at once.

"Fortune certainly favours you," said Snelling, with what was almost a sneer, when Maurice told him of the message. "First you are picked up in the Bush by the owner's fair daughter. That gives you one good start. Then poor old Edwards" (Edwards was the chief overseer whom Maurice had succeeded) "is killed by a kick from a horse, and you get his place. Now Drayton has gone the way of all flesh, and you step into his shoes. It's extraordinary the way Fortune runs with some men. Though I can't say why. I've never had a stroke of luck all my life through."

"Perhaps you haven't gone the right way to look for it," Maurice replied.

At the same time he wondered how the other had become aware of the fact that Miss Sherrard had saved his life. He had certainly not told him. He had no dislike to Snelling himself, but his instinct told him that the man was his enemy, and he was also a sufficiently good judge of human nature, to realize that, if the other had an opportunity of doing him an injury, he would not fail to avail himself of it.

In due course the owner reached the Station. To Maurice's disappointment his daughter did not accompany him. Mr. Sherrard had been deeply grieved by Drayton's death. He had always liked and respected the man, and, though no one knew it until many years afterwards, he proved this fact by being a true friend to his widow and orphan daughter. He appeared glad to meet Maurice again, and congratulated him heartily on the manner in which he had carried out his work during such a difficult time. The latter quite expected to be informed that a new manager, possibly his old chief at Wockatunga, would be sent down to take charge; but time went by, and though he was in Mr. Sherrard's company for a large proportion of each working day, nothing was said to him upon the subject.

On the day of Mr. Sherrard's arrival he had ventured timidly to inquire after Miss Nina's health

"She is very well, thank you," her father replied. "At present she is in New Zealand. Just at this time I miss her greatly. Had she been at home I have no doubt she would have accompanied me on this melancholy visit."

For some reason Maurice derived a feeling of satisfaction from this speech. Had he been asked to explain why, I fancy he would have found it difficult to have given a satisfactory reply.

"O Heaven!" he said to himself on one occasion. "If only I could disprove this hideous charge there would be nothing to prevent my coming forward and telling her who I am, and winning her, if she would have me. I fear, however, it will be impossible for me ever to clear myself. A suspected murderer I am, and a suspected murderer must remain to the day of my death."

Ten days later Mr. Sherrard announced his intention of returning to the South. (Mrs. Drayton and her daughter had left the Station during the previous week) On the afternoon preceding his departure the squatter and his acting-manager were seated in the office at the store. They had several important arrangements to make connected with the movements of the stock.

"What would you wish me to do sir?" Maurice inquired when he had given the owner a summary of the case. "Do you think it would be better for me to continue

in my present position until the new manager arrives ? ”

Mr Sherrard lay back in his chair and laughed.

“ I did not mean to have told you to-day,” he said, “ but you have forced my hand. I do not intend sending a new manager up. I am going to offer you the post. I know you are capable of filling it, for the reason that I have watched you lately, and have appreciated the value of your work.”

“ This is more than good of you, sir,” Maurice replied flushing with pride at the compliment the other had paid him. “ If you really think you can trust me, you may be quite sure that I will do everything in my power to prove myself worthy of your confidence.”

“ I am sure you will,” the other returned. “ Personally, I have not the least doubt but that you will be a great success I wonder what Nina will say when she hears about it ? Having discovered you that day when you were done for in the Bush she looks upon you now in the light of a *protégé*.”

“ I shall never be able to express the gratitude I feel to her,” said Maurice ; “ not only for what she did for me then, but also for the

interest she has been good enough to show in me."

Next day Mr. Sherrard returned to the South, and Maurice entered formally upon his duties as Manager. During the owner's stay on the place he had moved from the barracks to the house, and now he settled himself down there permanently. An elderly house-keeper superintended his domestic arrangements, making him as comfortable as a man could well be.

After that another year went by, and during that time Maurice acquitted himself to the owner's entire satisfaction. Good luck walked hand in hand with him. The only thorn in his side was the scarcely veiled animosity of his chief overseer. Needless to say, Snelling had discovered in Maurice's promotion to the managership, what he considered an additional stroke of injustice to himself, even though it had been the means of raising him to the position he had so long coveted. On his side, Maurice did all that lay in his power to win the man's liking. He was unsuccessful, however.

Once more shearing-time came round, and when the last wool drays had rolled away with their valuable freights, and the horde

of shearers and rouseabouts had struck their camp and gone elsewhere, a letter arrived from Mr Sherrard announcing the fact that he and his daughter intended paying their customary visit to the property. If all were well they would arrive about three weeks after Maurice's receipt of the letter.

The latter's heart beat faster as he read the news. He could scarcely believe that he was to see Nina again. He had three weeks in which to prepare for their coming, and he determined that that time should be put to the best use. They should see the station looking better than it had ever done before.

Two days before the date fixed for their arrival, he despatched a buggy and a pair of horses to the Township, which at that time was the railway terminus. Changes were stationed at various points along the road, in order that Mr. Sherrard and his daughter should travel as comfortably and as speedily as possible.

It was towards evening when the buggy was reported to be coming up the track beside the river, Maurice went to the garden-gate to receive *the pair*, a black boy accompanying him to take the horses.

"Glad to see you, Patterson," cried Mr.

Sherrard, as he brought the horses to a standstill. "Your arrangements for the road have been excellent. I don't know when I have done the journey in such good time. What do you say, Nina?"

But for once in her life his daughter showed signs of embarrassment. In the tall, well-dressed man before her, she found it difficult to recognise the Patterson of other days. She certainly said: "How d'you do?" to him, but the words were spoken in a tone she would use if she were addressing an utter stranger. Maurice helped her to alight from the carriage and inquired whether she were not tired after her long journey.

"Tired? Oh dear, no," she answered. "As you should know by this time, it takes a great deal to tire me!"

After that, Maurice escorted them to the house, where he had taken care that a meal should be ready for them.

That evening he found himself in trouble with his employer. Having no desire to appear to be pushing himself forward, he had removed his belongings to the room he had formerly occupied in the barracks, intending to take up his quarters there while Mr. and Miss Sherrard were at the Station. He

dined with the overseers, and afterwards went up to the house.

"Look here, Patterson," said Mr. Sherrard, as he entered the verandah, "I am going to give you a talking to. What do you mean by dining at the barracks? You're manager of this Station, and in that capacity it is your duty to sit at the head of the table here, and to give us the pleasure of your company."

"I thought perhaps you would prefer to be alone," replied Maurice apologetically.

"Papa and I see quite enough of each other," Miss Sherrard put in "You must really come, and prevent us from quarrelling."

From that moment Maurice took all his meals with his employer and his daughter. The month that followed was a happy, but distinctly dangerous one, so far as that young man was concerned. In his heart of hearts he knew, though he tried to argue with himself it was not so, that he loved Nina as he had never loved a woman in his life before. He knew also that his passion was utterly hopeless. Miss Sherrard, on her side, behaved to him with the utmost kindness. She rode with him, played tennis with him, laughed and joked with him, until he sometimes found it difficult to convince himself that he was

the same man who had been at the wheel of the *Fotheringay* on the night of the whale episode—the same on which she had first spoken to him.

Mr. Sherrard, with that consideration that was characteristic of him, had purchased the Draytons' furniture from the widow, and with it their cottage piano. After dinner, Nina, who, by the way, was the possessor of considerable musical talent, was wont to play and sing to them, and this was the hour of the day to which Maurice most looked forward. As he watched the girl seated at the piano, and reflected that in a few weeks' time she and her father would be returning to the South, his heart would sink within him. Life would, indeed, be dull then.

One afternoon, a fortnight or so before the Sherrard's contemplated departure, news was brought them to the effect that the river had risen and had flooded a considerable portion of the Back Country. A large number of sheep had been isolated, so the messenger stated, and stood in great danger of being drowned.

"I must go up there at once," said Maurice to his employer. "It may be possible to save them."

He hastily got together a number of the hands, filled a wagon with poles and ropes, and, having ordered the driver of the vehicle to follow him with as much speed as he could get out of the horses, set off on horseback to the scene of the catastrophe. It was fully thirty miles from the Head Station to the spot, and darkness had descended by the time he reached it. He discovered a couple of boundary riders camped on a small hill, and from them he learnt what had happened.

"It came down all of a rush, sir," said one of the men, "and now the dip's like a great lake. It's my belief there's more coming behind it."

"Let us hope not," said Maurice. "If it does we shall have trouble down at the Head Station. Where are the sheep?"

"Most of them we managed to get up on the ridges, sir," the man replied. "But there's still a thousand or so on an island away out in the middle."

Maurice strode down the hill to the water's edge in order to convince himself as to whether or not the flood was still rising. He could not judge properly in the evening light, but from what he could see he concluded that it was. The plaintive bleating of the marooned

sheep came to him from across the water as if in entreaty. When he returned to the camp, he found that the wagon had arrived, whereupon he gave orders that large fires should be lighted, in order that they might see what they were doing, and that work should be commenced at once. By means of the ropes they had brought with them, the boards and poles with which the wagon was laden were lashed together, and thus, a rough, but nevertheless serviceable, raft was constructed, capable of carrying upwards of thirty sheep. By the time it was finished every one was tired out, and, as nothing could be done until daylight, the men turned into their blankets and were soon fast asleep.

Immediately day dawned, Maurice was up and about. He looked down the hill, and it was a strange sight that met his eyes. As far as he could see stretched a vast sheet of water, penned in by the surrounding hills. At ordinary times the river ran through the centre of this basin, finding its outlet on the Southern side between two massive limestone cliffs. Now the water, unable to get away quickly enough through the narrow opening, was being forced out on either side on to the plain. In the Narrows, as the cutting be-

tween the cliffs was called, it ran like a mill sluice, some twenty yards wide and ten deep.

After the party had breakfasted work commenced. The veriest tyro could have seen how arduous the task was likely to prove. In the first place, the heavy raft had to be launched, and to be propelled by means of long poles to the island on which the sheep were huddled together—a distance of more than a quarter of a mile. After that came the still more difficult task of driving the frightened animals on to it, and, having got them there, to prevent them from jumping into the water. More than once, until they found the proper channel, the raft ran aground, and could only with difficulty be got afloat again. Then, in what was perhaps the deepest part, one of the hands fell overboard, and, had it not been for one of the boundary rider's prompt action, would in all probability have been drowned. The work, to say the least of it, was arduous, and dangerous to a degree.

Towards midday Mr. Sherrard and his daughter put in an appearance to watch the operations

"I am afraid the water is steadily rising, sir," said Maurice to the former after he had

surveyed the scene of action after the mid-day meal. "It won't do much harm, however, if we can only get the stock away."

"How many are there on the island now?" Mr. Sherrard inquired.

"I am afraid we haven't got half of them away yet," Maurice answered. "What we really want is a raft twice the size. However, if we keep steadily on, we may be able to transfer a large proportion of the animals into a place of safety before the island is submerged."

All day the work continued, but at nightfall there still remained about two hundred unfortunate animals on the disappearing island. Willing as the men were to save them, it seemed impossible that they would be able to do so.

Mr. Sherrard announced his intention of remaining with the workers all night, and his daughter desired to stay with him. This, however, her father would not hear of. Eventually she was persuaded to spend the night at a boundary rider's hut, situated some five miles further down the river.

"I am sure the man's wife will do all in her power to make you comfortable," said Maurice, when the subject was mentioned to

him "If you are really anxious to see what we are doing, you could ride up here as early as you please in the morning. I am afraid, however, by that time our labours will be futile, and we shall all be thinking of returning to the station."

"That's the worst of being a girl," she replied. "One can never be of any real use. If I had been a man you would have allowed me to help you with the raft; as it is, I am sent off, in order that I may be out of the way."

"I am sure it is nothing of the kind," Maurice expostulated. "You have been more than useful to us to-day. Who amongst us thought of using that rope on the tree? Who boiled our tea for us, and so saved time? No, Miss Sherrard, I am not going to let you run yourself down. If we are still here to-morrow, and you will help us again, you know how grateful we shall all be."

"In the meantime, I am to be sent down to that nasty little hut," she remarked, making a little *moue*. "Well, I won't add to your worries by grumbling. Will you ask one of the men to bring me my horse?"

"If you will allow me, I will do that myself," Maurice replied, and forthwith went

to the fence to which two or three horses were tethered. He saddled it, and brought it back to the spot where Miss Sherrard was standing, talking to her father. Every one else being too busy, one of the Jackeroos, a good-looking but shy youth of nineteen, was called up to act as escort to the hut in question. When he had secured a horse, they accordingly set off together, while Maurice and Mr. Sherrard went to the raft once more.

As Fate would have it, they were only destined to rescue two more loads ere the water swept over the top of the little island, and in a very few seconds the helpless sheep were drifting away to destruction.

"It's a bad business," said Maurice, as he climbed the hill beside his employer "But we have done better than I ever hoped we should do. As it is we have got off fairly easy—and have reason to congratulate ourselves upon the success that has attended our endeavours."

At that moment little did either of them imagine the terrible ordeal they would be called upon to pass through that very night.

CHAPTER X

As there was nothing else to be done after the sheep on the island has been washed away, the workers returned to the camp and sat down to the evening meal. It was too late to think of attempting to reach the Station, and Maurice could not induce Mr Sherrard to pass the night at the hut whither he had despatched his daughter. He intended sharing the camp, he declared, with the men who had worked so well for him that day. The night was a fine one, and overhead the stars shone as Maurice had never seen them shine in England. The roar of the flood could be plainly heard, with occasionally the banging of a floating tree against a still standing brother, or the crash of a giant of the forest when the treacherous water eventually undermined him, and he too became a victim of the enemy.

The meal eaten, the men lit their pipes and fell to yarning, the presence of their employer

proving no bar to their loquacity. Most of them had seen a variety of strange life. One man had served with Balmaceda, and had been present at the latter's defeat outside Valparaiso; another had had some curious experiences among the Islands, while a third had seen some fighting with the Dutch in Achin. Taken altogether they were an interesting set of men, who only lacked words in which to tell their tales.

An hour or so later the conversation turned by gradual transition to the supernatural, and a young overseer told a story concerning a certain Banshee, who was supposed to warn members of his family of approaching death. Another remembered a tale of a ghost-ridden ship which never went into port, but a phantom harbour-master came off to collect his dues. After that there was a short silence, when somebody, addressing old Bickford, the grizzled but still active second overseer, reminded him of a curious experience he had once described to him. There was a general and immediate demand for the story, whereupon he consented to tell it. Had he given that of his own life it would probably have been still stranger, for no one knew what it was that had brought

him into the Bush. He was as a rule a taciturn old fellow, but when he pleased he could be genial, after his own fashion.

"Scarcely one of you young fellows," he began, "was born when what I'm going to tell you about took place. It was in the early days, and the Bush was nothing like what it is now. We had no billiard rooms at the Head Station, machine shears in the shed, hydraulic dumping presses, or patent wool washing apparatus. Not a bit of it! The Station houses were as often as not mere slab huts, we did our shearing by hand, dumped our bales as best we could, and sent our wool away for the most part in the grease. Now-a-days you've got to get away into the back blocks of Queensland—out beyond the Diamantina, or as far up as the Flinders, to find anything like what I call a rough Station, and even then I very much doubt whether you'd do it. Mark my words, Australia won't be the same place soon. It's getting too civilized by half. Before very long you'll find the niggers putting on dress clothes for dinner, and the storekeeper serving out rations in a top hat."

The old man gave a growl of dissatisfaction. He was one of the old school, and did not

believe that so much comfort was compatible with good business.

"But there," he continued, "growling about changes in the way of working things is not getting on with my story, is it? So let's fire away. Just pass me the pannikin, will you, and let me wet my whistle, and then I'll begin"

Having thus prepared himself for his task, he gave a few preliminary draws at his pipe, gazed meditatively into the fire as if for inspiration, and commenced.

"You see it was this way. I was over-seering at Curchell on the Murrumbidgee, when the owner, old man Donaldson, as cute an old Scotchman as ever ate porridge, happened to hear that there was a place on the Murray that was going for what you might call the price of an old hat. He was a wonderful hand at picking up bargains, was the old man, and what he didn't know about country or sheep, well, I don't know of anybody living to-day who could teach him. Not afraid either of planking the money down when it came to the point. Treat him fair and he'd treat you fair, but rub him the wrong way and I can promise you you'd find a tiger cat. That was old

man Donaldson. He's gone to the Never-Never country now, but I liked him and he liked me. What's more we trusted each other, and you all know how far that goes in the Bush. Well, as I was saying, the old fellow heard of this place on the Murray, and, from what had been told him, he thought he saw his way to a bargain. I'd been out on the run, overhauling a fencing contract, and it was late in the day when I got back. When I went into the house I could see there was something on the old man's mind. He didn't say anything then, but after supper he took me on one side, so that the others should not hear, and told me about the news he had received.

"It's a great chance," said he, rubbing his old hands together. "A chance that doesn't come many times in a man's lifetime. I'm going to make the most of it, and you must help me. It will be money in your pocket if you do."

I asked him what it was he wanted me to do, and then it was I was told that I was to make my way down to the place in question, to examine it, to find out why it was going so cheap, and to come back and report as quickly as I knew how. Next morning I

accordingly set off, taking with me a black boy named Wiora—poor little beggar, he was drowned the year following out on the Warrego River, taking cattle across when the floods were out.

Well, not to go too much into particulars, I made a good journey of it, and reached the Station just about midday. The house itself I found was built on a hill some eighty or a hundred feet above the river level. The roof was thatched and there were four rooms, that is to say, one big living room, two bedrooms, and a small room that, so I afterwards discovered, was used as an office. The kitchen was a small slab hut, twenty paces or so away from the main building. The wool-shed, men's hut, and the store were located a quarter of a mile distant, and were evidently in a fairly good state of repair. The river opposite the house was about a couple of hundred yards wide, with high banks lined, as usual, with gum trees, and fairly big ones at that. Taken altogether, it presented an attractive appearance, so much so indeed that I was favourably impressed by it even before I had had time to see much of it.

Having crossed the small fire paddock, I

rode up to the house itself, and, dismounting, handed my horse over to Wiora. There was no one about, not a horse in the paddock, not a sheep within sight, only an old collie dog stretched out in the shadow of the water tank, and a flock of white cockatoos in a tree at the end of what might once have been a garden. As a rule, when a stranger arrives at a Station, half the population turns out to welcome him, but it wasn't so in this case. So far as I could see, the place might have been deserted, for any sign of life there was. I crossed the verandah and entered the living room by way of the French window. It was then that I received my second surprise. Seated at a table in the centre of the room was a man, maybe fifty years of age. He had grey hair, a short close-clipped beard of the same colour, and was dressed in a Crimean shirt and moleskin trousers. When I entered he was sitting bolt upright in his chair, looking straight at the wall before him. Though he must have heard me come in he did not appear to be aware of my presence, but sat there just in the same attitude, for all the world as if he were galvanised. I'd never seen such a sight before, and I give you my word I was not

half pleased by it. For a moment I did not know what to do or how to accost him.

"Good day," I said at last, feeling that I must do something. "I'm afraid you're not very well, are you?"

He turned his head on hearing my voice, and looked at me—such a look as you can scarcely imagine. Try to picture a human being in the depth of despair—a man who has no hope left in him—out of whose life happiness has vanished never to return, and you may have some idea of the expression on this strange individual's face as I saw it then.

At last, as if with an effort, he rose and crossed the room towards me.

"I must ask your pardon," he replied, in the voice and tone of a cultured man. "I am afraid I am a laggard in hospitality. The fact of the matter is I have not been very well of late and, at the moment of your entry, I fear I must have been indulging in a nap. Won't you come in? Have you ridden far to-day?"

I answered his question and, having done so, informed him of the object of my visit, whereupon he expressed himself as glad to see me, and congratulated my employer on

the foresight he had shown in taking advantage of the opportunity that presented itself of acquiring the property.

"There could scarcely be a better," he remarked, still looking straight before him. "The country is first rate. We're seldom, if ever, short of water or feed. The coach passes within half a mile on the other side of the river, and the steamers are up and down every week."

All this time he had not asked me to sit down, nor had he, after the custom of the Bush, offered me any hospitality. There was something about the man's manner that I could not understand. It struck me that he was keeping something back from me, while pretending to be quite at his ease. Large as my experience had been of queer characters, I don't know that I had ever met another like this particular specimen. That he was an educated man was quite certain—his manner told me that. At the same time he was evidently one who had descended, and that rapidly, in the social scale.

"Are you the only person on the place?" I asked at last, when he had sat for some minutes looking straight before him.

"The only man," he answered, without interest, and as if he were talking to himself "There was another, but he went out a month ago—hanged himself in this room. I was sorry for poor old Peter. Stephens was his surname, Peter Stephens—a good fellow. Oxford man and all that sort of thing, but the Bush proved too much for him. He used to wander about the house, in and out, day and night, talking to himself, spouting Latin and Greek and swearing that somebody was following him, when he knew as well as I did that there wasn't a living soul but myself within fifty miles of us. Then, one day, when I came back from the shed, what should I find but him hanging from that beam up there, dead as a door nail, and no pretty sight either, I give you my word. I buried him the same night by moonlight, at the bottom of the garden. Poor old Stephens—Oxford scholar and gentleman he was. Good man all round, and now—where is he?"

This was cheerful conversation wherewith to welcome a stranger and, as I listened to it, I began to think that my inspection of the place was not going to be quite as pleasant a business as I had at first imagined. That

the old fellow before me was not quite right in his mind I had not the least doubt—but whether it was his companion's death, or the fact that he had been living so much alone that had brought it about was impossible to say

Having had about as much of his conversation as I could stand for the time being, I made an excuse and went out again to Wiora, leaving the man still seated at the table, looking straight before him, and muttering to himself as he had been doing when I entered.

“If ever I get like that,” said I to myself, “all I'll ask will be to be put underground as soon as possible. Such an exhibition is neither decent nor instructive.”

On reaching the men's hut, I discovered that it was empty; certain other signs led me to suppose that it had not been occupied for a considerable time. This, in itself, was sufficient to cause me surprise but, though I did not know it then, I had still stranger experiences in front of me. One thing was certain, I was in no particular hurry to get back to the house; indeed, had it not been for the look of the thing, I would willingly have camped with Wiora under one of the

gums on the river bank. That, however, was of course out of the question.

When I had seen the horses turned out, I told Wiora to make himself as comfortable as he could in the hut, and then, picking up my valise, made my way back to the house. I'm not prepared to say what the reason was, but I know that, as I crossed the open space that separated the huts from the principal building, my heart was as heavy as lead. That I should find my host seated as I had left him I had not a shadow of doubt. In this supposition, however, I was mistaken, for when I entered the sitting-room I found it empty; indeed it was not until the shadows of night had drawn in, and I was beginning to wonder how I was going to manage for my evening meal, that he put in an appearance. When he did so, he looked for all the world as if he had been burrowing in a rabbit hole. His hair and beard and nails were full of sand, while there was a light in his eyes that was as nearly akin to that of madness as anything I have ever seen. He offered no apology to me for having left me so long to myself—nor did he seem to recognize the likelihood of my standing in need of a meal after my

day's ride. It doesn't often fall to the lot of a man to have such a casual host.

At last, tired of waiting, I made my way to the kitchen and procured food for myself, returning with it to the living room. He looked up as I entered, and then muttered something that sounded like an apology for his neglect. Since his companion's death, he informed me, he had not eaten much. I need not say that I was beginning to tire of these repeated references to the dead man. It was bad enough to have been told that he had hanged himself in the room; it was worse to be continually reminded of the fact. More than once I found myself glancing up at the beam as if I half expected to see the wretched man still suspended from it.

After supper, if by such a title you can designate a meal that consisted of a scrag end of cold mutton and the hardest bit of damper to which I have ever put tooth, I lit my pipe and, being quite unable to extract any information concerning the Station and its prospects from my companion, put on my hat and went out into the verandah. It was a glorious night. The moon was at the full and in consequence one could almost

see to read in the open. At the foot of the garden, near what I had been told was the late Mr. Stephens' grave, the river was sweeping along on its way to the sea, and on the bank the frogs were croaking as if the beauty of the night depended on the amount of noise they made. I strolled down the path and stood for some time gazing down at the splendid stretch of water. Away, on the other side, the forest looked mighty lonesome, but when a mopoke began his doleful cry I could stand no more of it, so turned myself about and started back for the house, wishing that any one had been sent on this errand other than myself. If the truth must be confessed I was not by any means looking forward to spending the night in the house. There was too much of the late Mr. Stephens about the place for my fancy. He may have been a very decent fellow in his way—but 'twixt night and morning I felt that I could have very well dispensed with the recollection of him. I could also have steeled myself to do without that of his esteemed and still-living colleague, whom I could see as I made my way up the path towards the house—seated at the table in his usual

attitude, picking at his beard with his long fingers and looking straight before him as if he were staring at his departed friend.

I was in the act of setting foot in the verandah when a sound on my right attracted my attention. I immediately turned and looked in the direction whence it proceeded. A moment later, who should make his appearance before me but my young friend Wiora—blubbering as if his heart were breaking, kneeling and clutching at my knees. Having my own opinion as to the way you should treat niggers I caught him a cuff on the ear and asked what he meant by such behaviour.

“No good this place,” says he. “Debbil—debbil walk longa here. Plenty frightened this one”

“Humbug,” says I, though mark you I’m not at all certain I meant it. “What do you mean by there being *debbil-debbils* here?”

It wasn’t much good, however, trying to question him. All I could gather was that he’d come up to the house in search of a meal and that as he approached the kitchen he had met what he had at first thought was a live man but which proved to be a *debbil-debbil*, for the reason that while he

looked at it it disappeared. Once more he repeated his assertion that the place was no good, and when he wished himself back at Curchell I must admit that I felt disposed to agree with him. I discovered next day that he had spent the night under a tree in the centre of the horse paddock, preferring any discomfort to sleeping in either of the men's huts or the house.

When I had got rid of him I entered the verandah and passed from it into the living room. A solitary candle, stuck in a bottle, was burning on the table, helping, after its own fashion, to add to the general dreariness of the place. My host had not waited for me, but had retired to his own room—a fact which was disclosed to me by the extraordinary snores that came from that apartment.

“Well, for gaiety this beats anything I’ve ever known,” I said to myself as I looked round, my eyes at last resting on that wretched beam in the half dark roof above my head.

Realizing that it was no use my sitting up I made my way to my own room and undressed. It was a miserable little place, and looked out towards the stock-yard and the men’s

hut For some reason or another the Bush Architect, whoever he may have been, had not been able to manage a door, and in consequence a full view of the living room was permitted me from the bed—a circumstance for which I was by no means grateful. The moonlight streamed into the room, producing an effect I never want to see again.

Whatever the unpleasant experiences of the day may have been they did not prevent me from falling asleep almost as soon as my head touched the pillow. The fact was I had had a long journey, and was thoroughly tired out. I was not destined, however, to enjoy an undisturbed night. First a couple of native cats found their way in, and fell to quarrelling under my bed. After a while I drove them out and then went back to resume my slumbers. But before I could go off, a dingo came down from the scrub on the hill at the back and howled like a lost soul behind the house. Eventually, he, in his turn, cleared out and I began to think that my troubles were at an end. Little did I guess that they were practically only just beginning. Do what I would I could not sleep. I tumbled and tossed about, while the moonlight climbed

steadily up the further wall of the other room towards that abominable beam I closed my eyes and tried not to think of it, but the effort was a failure I found myself presently wondering what the man's past had been and what it was that had driven him to take his own life. From that I went on to picture him as a boy in his English home and speculating as to whether his mother were alive, and if so whether she had been informed of his end. While I was occupied in this fashion something caused me to look into the next room. Now, I'm not exaggerating, at least not wilfully, when I say that what I saw there brought the sweat pouring out of me, and almost made my hair stand on end. Believe me or not, but full and fair in the moonlight, and so distinct that I knew I could not be mistaken, was the body of the man himself hanging from the beam. The face was turned from me—but there could be no doubt about the rest. Even now, knowing what I *do* know, I cannot help shuddering when I think of it. It was the most horrible sight I have ever seen, and I never want to be favoured in that way again, I can promise you. There are people who

say they would not be afraid of a ghost. I am, and I don't deny it. I'd stand up to the biggest man living, but when it comes to suicides re-acting their death scenes, I draw the line. On this occasion I turned my face to the wall, and lay like that till daybreak. When I looked round then, thank goodness, the figure had gone.

Next morning, at breakfast (such a meal as you never saw—cooked by my host) I was compelled to broach the subject of the late Mr. Stephens.

"You saw him, did you?" said he. Then he added in a voice that fairly gave me the creeps—"I see him every night. Sometimes he takes it into his head to walk about—goes down to the wool-shed and the men's hut. That's why I can't keep a hand on the place. If your Governor's going to buy it he'll have a splendid night-watchman. But it won't be the most popular place along the river. Take my word for that. You're the first visitor I've had for close upon six months, and now I suppose you will be following the example of all the rest and clearing out. They seldom stay more than a few days. They don't take kindly to poor old Stephens, I suppose. There was Wilkins

of Jabica—as sociable a chap as you'd find in a long day's march, dropped in one day and went away in the morning as soon as it was light. Talked about Stephens coming into his room in the middle of the night and trying to catch him by the throat. Then there was a man named Purley—Dare-devil Purley I believe they call him—came and woke me up—said he'd seen—well, I won't tell you what he said he'd seen, because I know your nerves are not quite up to the mark this morning and it might make you go away and leave me and I like company myself, though you mightn't think it."

He was quite right there—I should certainly not have thought it. I've met some queer men in my time, but never such a dismal individual as the person then sitting opposite me. He'd have added a gloom to a funeral.

Well, to shorten my story a bit, I might say that I spent the rest of the day out on the Run, having a look round and making notes for the old man's benefit. There could be no doubt it was a first-class property, or would be if it were properly looked after, but by the time that I returned in the evening, and you may be sure I'd had plenty of

leisure to think it all over, I had come to the conclusion that nothing would induce me to accept the position of Manager, even if it were offered to me. If it hadn't looked bad, or there had been any way of getting out of it, I certainly would not have slept in the house that night. There was nothing to be done, however, but to make the best of it. So I spent another miserable evening with the Manager, listening to the story of his woes and innumerable references to Mr Stephens, and retired to rest about nine o'clock in about as miserable a frame of mind as a man could well be. I'm not going to tell you that I saw anything out of the common, but I *do* know that there was somebody walking round the house for upwards of an hour, muttering and groaning in a fashion that was almost as bad as what I had seen on the previous night.

Next day I was out on the Run again, and when I returned I had made up my mind to leave for home next day. I told myself that I knew all that was to be known about the place, and that it was no use my remaining longer. But as it turned out I was not to be allowed to get away quite so soon as I expected. As I rode up

to the house I became aware that there was a stranger seated in the verandah. I gave my horse to Wiora, and entered the garden to discover to my astonishment that the visitor in question was none other than the old man—my employer. He noticed my surprise, and after he had greeted me explained that he had unexpected business further down the river and that he had determined to take in the Station on his way, and have a look round for himself. He then asked what I thought of it, and I gave him my opinion, as straight as I knew how, allowing him to understand very plainly that, while I had no fault to find with the quality of the country, I had *nothing* whatsoever to say in favour of the house.

He looked at me sideways as I said this, and inquired what I found wrong with it ?

“Are you going to stay here to-night ?” I asked by way of preliminary.

“What do you suppose ?” he answered. “Do you think I’m going to camp out when I can have a roof over my head ?”

“Very good,” I said. “In that case you will be able to judge for yourself.”

He scratched his head and looked at me

again. There never was an old man who had sharper eyes.

"You know something," he remarked. "And I'm not quite sure that I couldn't make a guess at it. I've seen the Manager in yonder, and understand that he had a friend named Stephens."

After that I thought I saw my way clear. I was going to get the old fellow out of this business at any cost. Hard-headed as he was I knew that he was as superstitious as a schoolgirl. He got it I suppose from his Scotch descent. Let him have an interview with Master Stephens, said I to myself, and I think I know what the result will be.

Half an hour later we sat down to supper, which was as dreary a meal as any I had yet eaten in the house. The Manager, our host, began at once to discourse about the inevitable Stephens, while the moths fluttered round the candle and the wind whistled and groaned outside. Between times there was a sound like somebody talking in the verandah, but who that somebody was none of us inquired. We pretended to take no interest in the matter. About nine o'clock we went to bed—the old man and I sharing the same room. As we prepared for the

night he informed me that, while he liked what he had seen of the place, he did not think he would take it. He was careful to explain that this decision was to be accounted for by the fact that he anticipated he should have some difficulty in securing a Manager. I told him that I thought so too; a remark that seemed to annoy him considerably. A silence followed, during which I fell asleep. It is only fair to mention here that earlier in the evening I had given him a complete account of my adventures on the preceding nights.

How long I remained asleep I cannot say. All I know is that I was awakened by such a shaking as it seldom falls to the lot of a man to receive from his employer.

I could see his face in the moonlight and it did not look pretty. He was trembling like a man with the palsy.

"Lord deliver us," says he. "I've seen that man hanging in the next room. It's gone now but I'm as sure I saw it as I am of anything. Let us get out of this place. I'm not going to close my eyes in it again."

"We can't get out to-night," I replied. "Wait a moment and I'll get the lamp

out of the next room and we'll sit up and smoke till daylight."

"I didn't like the idea of going into the other room, but I could see that it had got to be done, so in I went and, when I had lighted the lamp, was about to return with it when something caught my eye. Not without some misgiving I looked up at the fatal beam, after which I picked up a chair that had fallen over and mounting it held the lamp aloft the more carefully to examine it. That done, I returned to my employer.

"We'll make tracks from here as soon as it's light," said he, pulling at his grey beard as if he'd have it out by the roots

"And lose one of the finest properties along the river," I answered. "No, sir, I've come to the conclusion that this place is good enough for me."

The look on his face almost made me laugh. He was so bewildered by the change of front that he scarcely knew what to do or say.

"Bless the man," he cried. "What does it mean? This evening you were swearing that nothing would tempt you to remain here; now you say it suits you. Explain yourself or you'll drive me mad."

"I have nothing to explain," I answered,

"I am afraid not very truthfully. But will you let me give you a little bit of advice—you can take it or leave it as you please. That's your own affair."

"Go on," he said, throwing a glance into the next room as he spoke.

"Well, this is my advice," I continued; "make your way down to Adelaide as fast as you can go. You can pick up the coach to-morrow morning at The Crossing. See the owner of the place and offer him whatever you may think fit for it. You'll find it will pay you."

"But I don't understand what it all means," he replied.

"Perhaps not—but I do, and you shall hear all I've got to tell in the morning. That's to say if we can get the Manager out of the way for half an hour. Till then, however, I must keep my own counsel. I don't want him to see my hand."

At last breakfast time arrived and when we had disposed of the meal, I persuaded the old man to take the Manager down to the wool-shed and to keep him there for a while. Thus he did, and as soon as they were out of sight I set to work on a piece of amateur burglary. The room in which

the Manager slept was invariably kept locked, a fact which had struck me as being rather extraordinary from the beginning. By a curious oversight, however, the window at the back had not been fastened and through this I easily effected an entrance. The room itself was only a small affair, and poorly furnished. It possessed, however, a large cupboard to which, after a cursory examination of the rest, I made my way. The folly of the man was extreme. The one thing of all others he should have kept locked he left open. One glimpse inside was sufficient to show me that my suspicions were correct. Hanging from a peg was a suit of clothes, stuffed with grass to resemble a man. The head was decorated with a mask, and the hair made out of what once had been a coir mat. Round the neck was a rope—a portion of it much frayed.

"I think we know all about Mr. Stephens now," I said to myself as I regarded it. "From this moment I don't mind how long I stay on the place and our friend here can hang himself all day and all night if he pleases for the harm he'll do my nerves. It's a poor old trick but I'd like to find out why it has been played upon us."

I closed the cupboard doors, climbed out of the window and, having made sure that my doings had not been observed, strolled down to the wool-shed. Half an hour later I had an interview with the old man and told him all that I had discovered. In less than an hour he was off to catch the coach, ordering me to remain where I was until he returned from Adelaide. That the Manager was fairly at a loss to understand the meaning of all this I could plainly see—but then of course, you see, he was unaware that I had penetrated his secret. However, knowing what I did, I managed to put up with his society and never even once smiled when he talked about the lamented Stephens. Despite certain mutterings outside, which I found occasion to discover emanated from the man himself and the fairly realistic effigy on the beam, I felt no uneasiness. As you know even a conjuring trick palls when you have discovered how it's worked.

Ten days later the old man returned, and in the best of humours. He had bought the place dirt cheap and at once offered me the managership of it. I accepted there and then and afterwards inquired the reason of our host's curious behaviour.

"He wanted it for himself," said the other. "That explains it all. He was clever enough to know that you can't work a Station without hands and that the talk of ghosts is the surest way of keeping them off. He thought he'd get the place for an old song—but he reckoned without me. He'll find himself badly left, if I know anything about it."

As a matter of fact this is exactly what happened. What the unfortunate man said when he heard everything would have done credit to a bullocky offsider in his best form.

That was a good Station and I should never have left it had not the old man died and the property changed hands. Now you know the true story of my only adventure with a ghost. It has taken a good time to tell—but it's a warning against taking things too seriously and also against believing all that you see—spirits included.

Later, one of the overseers commenced to sing. The man had a good voice, and the song he had chosen was Chevalier's well known roster ditty.

"I've got a pal,
A reg'lar out an' outer,

She's a dear good old gal,
I'll tell yer all about 'er.

"It's many a long year since fust we met,
'Er 'air was then as black as jet,
It's whiter now, but she don't fret,
Not my old gal!"

Then came the chorus which was taken up by all the men. At such a time and with such surroundings it had a strangely pathetic effect.

"We've been together now for twenty years,
An' it don't seem a day too much,
There am't a lady livin' in the land,
That I'd swop for me dear old Dutch."

The last time Maurice had heard this particular song had been on a Derby Day. He had gone down on Lord Lilchester's coach, and he remembered that little Dicky Belston, one of the party, had insisted that the performer should sing it twice in order that he (Belston) who had not a note of music in his composition, should learn to whistle it. Maurice shut his eyes and conjured up the whole scene. He recalled the fact that he had won fifteen hundred pounds that day, and that he had not a penny of it left a fortnight later.

"Good Heavens! What a fool I was in those days!" he muttered to himself.

"Never mind, this life is a thousand times better than the old one, or rather, it would be were it not for that awful weight."

"You are very quiet to-night, Patterson," his employer remarked (He had been watching the other's face by the light of the fire.) "I am afraid you must be worn out after your heroic struggles of to-day."

"I am tired, that is all," Maurice replied. "But not more so than any one else. But listen! What's that?"

"I only hear the noise of the flood," Mr. Sherrard replied. "What did you hear?"

"It sounded like the galloping of a horse. There it is again."

What Maurice had said proved to be correct. A horse, whether ridden or not, was rapidly approaching them from the North, and above the clatter of the animal's hoofs could be heard another, and peculiar sound. A few second later, Morgan, one of the Boundary riders further up the river, mounted on a foam-covered horse, dashed into the fire light.

"The flood! The flood!" he cried. "It's coming down behind me. It's washed Bill Blake's hut away, and mine's gone by this time."

On hearing this dire intelligence all the men sprang to their feet with one accord.

"Listen to that!" some one cried.

The peculiar noise that had attracted their attention after the sound of the horse's hoofs, had now developed into a roar that could only have one meaning.

"The hut! O Heaven! The hut below the Narrows!" groaned Mr. Sherrard. "Is there no time to warn them?"

"Leave that to me," said Maurice hoarsely, as he hastened to the spot where a horse had been secured, in case its services might be required during the night.

When he had adjusted the saddle and bridle he mounted, Mr. Sherrard holding the animal as he did so.

"Save her, Patterson," cried the other, "and ask what you like of me."

"I'll save her for my own sake," Maurice shouted back, and then the race begun.

The horror of that ride against time for the life of the woman he loved, will remain with Maurice as long as he can remember anything. For the first mile or so, I do not think he was conscious of anything save the one overpowering remembrance that Nina's life depended upon his reaching the hut.

before the water. He was only too well aware that the frail little cabin, when he had passed it on the previous evening, had been but a few feet above the level of the flood. With this fresh volume of water coming down it could scarcely fail to be washed bodily away. There were two women there, and some helpless children. If his horse should fail, or if he were to arrive too late, their doom was sealed.

Heedless of everything, he galloped on, urging his horse to his utmost endeavours. The trees and bushes seemed to fly past him. Then he descended the dip in which they had buried the old boundary rider earlier in the year, and after that urged his horse up the ascent and entered the Narrows. Never pausing for a moment, he steered his way between the limestone rocks and, as he did so, heard the roar of the torrent as it forced its way through the gut below him.

Leaving the Narrows behind him he turned to the right, descended the hill, surmounted another, passed the large clump of mulga on his left, and eventually, after a ride that seemed to him to have lasted for hours, found himself on the track that led to the hut in question. His horse was well-nigh exhausted, he neverthe-

less urged him with voice and heel, to continue his headlong course. At the foot of the hill he pulled the animal up with a suddenness that almost threw him on to his haunches. A feeling of terror took possession of him as he realized that in all probability he was too late. The flood had been quicker than he, and now the hut stood on an island, cut off from safety by two hundred yards of raging water. His heart sank within him like lead. What was he to do? Was Miss Sherrard in the building, or had she received timely warning and escaped? In the latter case she would, he argued, have returned to her father. And even putting her on one side, what about the woman and children? The only way to set his mind at rest on these matters was to reach the hut; but to be able to do that, it would be necessary for him to swim that foaming waste of water dotted with tree trunks and the bodies of dead and drowning animals. With those precious lives at stake, however, he dared not hesitate. Throwing his feet from the stirrups, he endeavoured to induce his horse to take the water. But the terrified animal again and again refused. He knew the danger as well as his master, and nothing could persuade him

to risk his life in the swirling flood. At last, realizing that it was useless to waste further time upon the animal, Maurice dismounted and cast him loose. Then, discarding his coat and his boots, he waded into the water, which was rising higher and higher every moment. For some yards, it was but little more than knee deep, then it gradually rose until it became necessary for him to swim. As he got nearer and approached the usual course of the river, the more violent did the current become. It buffeted him, threw him hither and thither like a cork, until at last he stood in deadly fear of being swept hopelessly past the building he was risking so much to reach. In perfect condition though he was, and brilliant swimmer as he had always been reckoned, his strength at last began to give way. Indeed, had he not been able to seize upon a large log that floated past him, it is extremely doubtful whether he would have been able to keep his head above water. By means of the log, however, he was enabled to rest himself for a few minutes. Then the course of the river changed, and he found himself drifting to the right side of the hut instead of to the left as he had hitherto been doing. If only the log would take him

close enough to the little island ! But at one time it did not seem as if it were going to do so. When, however, it passed within sixty feet of it, seeing that he could not get any nearer by its aid he loosened his hold and struck out for the shore. By the time he reached it, he felt more dead than alive. After a short rest, and with staggering steps, he made his way up what remained of dry land.

After what seemed an eternity he arrived at the hut door, where he paused and called Miss Sherrard by name. But the wind must have carried his voice away, for no answer rewarded him. With a feeling that was very akin to awe, he raised the latch, pushed open the door and entered the dwelling. It was too dark for him to see anything, and he was about to call Miss Sherrard's name again when a voice from the further corner of the hut reached him.

" O Heaven ! " it said. " Who are you ? "

" Is that you, Miss Sherrard ? " cried Maurice. " Are you alone ? "

" Yes, quite alone," she answered, and then hastened forward to the doorway

The terrible ordeal through which she had passed had been too much for her, for as she

reached Maurice's side, she fell forward in a dead faint. Luckily he was able to catch her, and knowing that she would recover more quickly in the open, he carried her outside and laid her tenderly upon the ground. As he did so he noticed that the foam was only a few yards from the hut door. Kneeling beside the prostrate girl, he chafed her hands, and after a few minutes she opened her eyes and looked up.

"How did you get here?" she asked.

"I rode from the camp and then swam across," he answered. "Where is the boundary rider's wife and her children?"

"I do not know," she said. "Mr. Watson left me at the Narrows, and I came on alone. They were not here when I reached the hut. Perhaps the woman had warning that the flood was coming."

"But had you not time to get away?"

"I did not know that the water had surrounded the building," she replied. "I was making myself some tea at the fire, and when I went out to look I was cut off. I waited, thinking that it might fall as quickly as it had risen, but it did not do so. Oh, Mr. Patterson, what is to become of us?"

"We must endeavour to reach the higher

ground on the opposite side," he answered with one eye on the steadily advancing foam. "This hut, in all probability, will not be standing in a quarter of an hour's time."

"But how are we to cross that terrible stretch of water?" she cried. "It would be impossible to swim in such a stream!"

"Be brave," he replied. "If I could get you across all would be well. Are you prepared to trust yourself to me?"

"I could trust myself to no one better," she answered; and as she said it their eyes met.

But the question was, how were they to get over that terrible stretch of water? It had proved more than Maurice's match on his way to the hut, and he knew that it would be worse than useless for him to attempt to convey another over as well as himself. There was only one thing to be done. By some means he must endeavour to capture something that would serve to support them, for a time at least. He accordingly led his companion to that side of the hut nearest the shore they were so desperately anxious to reach. From where they stood, it was impossible in the darkness to see anything of it, and at that moment, because they so ardently

desired it, so it seemed, no tree or log came within measurable distance of them. Many passed out in the main stream, but to have attempted to reach them would have meant certain destruction. And every minute the water was steadily rising, until not more than a foot of dry ground remained on that side of the hut. Then, to his unmistakable delight, Maurice espied a large tree floating down the inside passage, and which, he conjectured, would pass the hut at a distance of about fifty feet. It was just possible they might be able to reach it, but he was well aware that the greatest danger would lie in the presence of its submerged branches, in which they might become entangled and be unable to extricate themselves. However, knowing it was no use anticipating disaster, he prepared for action.

The tree, which I have already said was a large one, was rapidly approaching the head of the little island, and Maurice realized that they must act promptly, if they intended doing so at all. He therefore waited until it was exactly opposite them, and then, placing his left arm round Miss Sherrard's waist, he stepped into the water.

"Don't be afraid," he cried. "Hold tightly

to me and be sure you do just as I tell you."

A moment later he was in deep water and being swept down stream. What a battle it was to keep his own and his companion's head above water, I must leave you to imagine for yourself. It had seemed, when they had started to reach it, that only a short distance separated them from the tree. In the deep water, however, they appeared to be hundreds of yards behind it. Maurice swam with the strength of despair, and Nina, terrified though she must have been, did her best not to hamper his movements. Would it be possible for them to reach the tree before it would be washed out into the main current again? If not, they were lost. Good fortune favoured them, however, for presently the black mass appeared to stop. (Probably one of the long branches had caught in an inequality upon the bottom.) Under the impetus of the water it swung half round. This gave Maurice time, and, just at the moment when he felt that his strength was giving way, he reached its side and seized hold of a projecting branch. Shouting to Miss Sherrard to take hold of another he drew himself up on the broad trunk, and as soon as he was seated astride it,

half-dragged, half-lifted his companion to a place of safety beside him, bidding her, at the same time, to cling to the support nearest her.

Then for a few moments his senses must have deserted him, for he has no recollection of anything that happened, until he found the tree was in the main current and being whirled along at a pace that made him almost sick with terror.

"Do not lose your hold upon that branch whatever you do," Maurice cried to his companion, for with the rolling, rocking mass under them, her seat was about as insecure as it could well be.

In the next few hours Maurice lived a lifetime. He seemed to have no knowledge of the passage of time. Yet it was gradually growing light, and, so swiftly had the current borne them along, that they were now only a few miles from the Head Station. In the first grey light of dawn a strange and awful picture met their eyes. The flood had filled the valley from side to side—a swiftly-moving plain of water dotted with floating trees, the remains of a hut, many bodies of animals, and once, more terrible than all, that of a man. The first glimpses that the unfortunate pair obtained of each other's faces told them

how terrible had been the effect of what they had endured that night.

All this time the tree, that had served them so well, bore them steadily along, keeping in the main current, and never once drifting towards the sides. As the sun rose they passed the spot where Mr. Drayton had been killed, and in a few minutes were in full view of the Head Station. Up to that time the flood had not reached the houses on the slope of the hill, but so high were the waters that the garden was almost entirely submerged. How bitter it was to them to regard it, as they swept remorselessly on, must be left to the reader's imagination. Though they strained their eyes they could not discover any sign of human beings to whom they might make signals of distress. Then, almost before they were aware they had done so, they had turned the bend and were out of sight.

Here, as Maurice soon realized, they were in greater danger than before, for the river bank on either side was practically forest land. Should the tree to which they were clinging be driven from the main channel into the forest they might be jammed there, and have nothing left them but to remain where they were stranded, until the flood should subside,

which might be a matter of days, in which case they would surely perish either of exhaustion or starvation.

As ill-luck would have it this was precisely what happened. The lighter end of their unwieldy craft became entangled in the trees, thus bringing the full force of water against the butt. This swung round with alarming velocity, and the impetus thus given to it drove that portion with a crash against one tree, then against another, until there was no longer any hope of its being able to extricate itself again. The block thus created caused the water to swirl under it like a mill-sluice, making the trunk to shake in a most alarming fashion.

"Oh, Mr. Patterson, what are we to do?" cried Miss Sherrard. "I feel as if I am being frozen! I cannot hold on much longer."

Maurice saw that if he could only manage to raise her so that she might seat herself on the mass of roots and dry earth that still remained above water, she would be more comfortable, and quite as safe as in her present position. But how was he to get her there? One slip from the trunk, and she would be sucked under it like a straw. It was plain to him, moreover, that it would be impossible

for her to climb without assistance. He looked about him to see if there were any other course open. There were many logs jammed among the trees, not so large as that on which they were dependent, but still of sufficient size to support them. Would it be wise, he asked himself, to leave their present security in the hope of bettering their condition? He put the question to his companion.

"I will do as you think best," she answered, feebly. "I trust myself entirely to you."

"And I mean to save you yet," he replied

It had struck him more than once that the current to their right was by no means as swift as elsewhere. It was a matter of some thirty yards to the nearest log on that side. If only he could get his companion so far he might possibly be able to reach the shallow water and later dry ground. The worst feature of such an attempt would be getting the girl off the tree on which she was seated. She was too weak to help herself, yet if her life were to be saved the attempt must be made.

Having settled the matter in his own mind, Maurice dropped from his place on the tree, and, still clinging with his right hand to a large branch, bade Miss Sherrard let herself

go. She did so without a second's hesitation, and for a moment disappeared beneath the surface. When she rose again he managed to seize her, however, and to lift her head above water. Then he struck out with all the strength he could command for the log he had set his heart upon reaching. After a terrible struggle they reached it and when he had assisted Miss Sherrard to climb on to it, Maurice took his place beside her. Then, little by little, and with infinite care, he managed to push one end of the log free from the tree on the right. As soon as it was clear it swung round, and then began slowly to float down stream. Guiding it as best he could, pushing it off from trees that threatened to bar its passage, he gradually lessened the distance that separated it from the shallow water, finding fresh hope when he induced it to move in the right direction and enduring agonies unspeakable when he fancied it was being sucked out into the main stream again. Once he turned and took a hurried glance back at his companion. Her face was absolutely colourless, and there was a look like death upon it. It did not take him long to realise that her strength had left her.

"I cannot hold on longer! Oh save me,



" ' I cannot hold on longer ' "

Mr. Patterson," she cried, and then slipped from her seat into the water.

Forgetting everything else, Maurice immediately swam to her assistance and placed his left arm about her. There was nothing for it now but to trust to his own fast diminishing strength to get her to land. Surely Fate would not be so cruel as to buoy him up with hope only to let him lose all, just when success was within his reach. Already he could see dry land. Fighting for what was worth more to him than his life, he swam to the nearest tree, pushed himself off from it, and then reached the next, where he clung completely exhausted. Then a loud shout reached him from the bank.

"Hold on a moment longer and we will save you!"

But moments were as years with him now. His strength was almost gone. Then Miss Sherrard opened her eyes and looked at him. There was a wan little smile upon her face as she did so. Alas! it was all over with him. He could hold on no longer!

"Nina, my love," he muttered, after which his grasp loosened upon the bough, and he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN Maurice opened his eyes again he found himself lying at the foot of a tree, with two of the overseers kneeling beside him. They had been chafing his hands and feet, and one of them held a flask in his hand.

"That's right," said the elder of the two men when he saw that Maurice was conscious once more. "I thought we should get you round in time."

"You've had a precious near shave of it Mr. Patterson," said the other. "We only just managed to save you."

Meanwhile, the first speaker had poured some spirit from the flask into the cup, and, having diluted it with a little water, held it to Maurice's lips.

"Where is Miss Sherrard?" the latter asked, looking round as if he expected to see her near at hand.

"Her father has driven her home in the buggy," the man replied. "It is to return

at once for you. By Jove this has been a time. You never saw anything like his anxiety. He has been more like a madman than anything else all night. When he saw that your horse was running loose, and the hut below the Narrows had been washed away, I thought he would have dropped down in a fit. We've been searching all night up and down the river for you, and we were on our way back from the Fifteen Mile Hut when Bailey, here, caught sight of you among the trees. If we had been five minutes later you would have disappeared "

" Thank goodness you came when you did," said Maurice " Now, I don't know why I should wait here for the buggy. I can walk up to the Station."

" Man alive, you mustn't do anything of the kind," Bailey interposed. " Have you forgotten that you are without your boots ? "

This important fact had quite escaped Maurice ; what was more, he did not realize until he got on to his feet how exhausted he really was. He was content enough then to lie down once more upon the ground and to await the coming of the vehicle.

It was not long before it put in an appearance, driven by Snelling. He pulled up near

the tree while the two other men assisted Maurice to clamber into the vehicle.

"You've had a pretty bad time of it, they tell me," said Snelling, who felt that it was incumbent upon him to say something. "We began to think we should never see either of you again."

"My luck again, as you would say, Snelling," laughed Maurice, and then took his seat beside the other.

The remainder of the journey was performed in silence. When they reached the homestead, Mr. Sherrard, who had been dismissed from his daughter's room, was waiting to receive him. He helped Maurice to alight, and then led him up the path to the side of the house (it was impossible, by reason of the flood, to reach it from the front).

"Patterson," he said, "Heaven alone knows what I can say to you. You have rendered me a service I can never repay as long as I live. If she had been drowned I believe it would have killed me. God bless you, Patterson, God bless you."

Here Mr. Sherrard broke down completely, and Maurice felt inclined to follow his example.

"You must not thank me, sir," he said.

"I have only repaid a very small portion of the debt I owe to you."

"But what am I thinking about to keep you here, in your wet clothes," Mr. Sherrard continued. "You must get to bed as quickly as possible."

Maurice did so, and, after he had taken some food, slept like a top for twelve hours. His old housekeeper was in the room when he woke.

"Bless my soul, Mr. Patterson," she said, "so you're awake at last. You have had a splendid sleep, and you'll be all the better for it. Now I'll make you a nice bowl of soup, and when you've drunk that you must rest quiet for a bit, and then you'll be quite yourself again."

"How is Miss Sherrard?" Maurice inquired.

"Poor dear, she's very bad," the woman replied. "Mr. Sherrard's sent in to Mandelong for a doctor."

This news was almost too much for Maurice in his weak state, and yet he could scarcely see how it could be otherwise. If, with his wonderful constitution, he had been brought so low, what must have been the effect on the girl?

When the doctor arrived his verdict was

rheumatic fever of a very serious type. For upwards of two months Nina was confined to her bed. A doctor and two trained nurses were obtained from Brisbane at enormous expense, and everything that medical science could do for her was done. Maurice was up and about again on the second day after their adventure, but more than a week elapsed before he had altogether recovered from the shock. In order that there should be more room in the house Maurice had returned to his old quarters at the Barracks, though he still continued to take his meals with his employer.

One evening he was talking to Mr. Sherrard on the verandah. Suddenly the latter said:

"By the way, Patterson; Snelling came to me this evening to ask for a month's leave. He wants to go down to the South."

"Very good, sir," Maurice replied. "When does he leave?"

"I told him I could not say anything about it," the owner replied. "I said that you were the manager and he had better see you about it. I am afraid the man does not take very kindly to you, Patterson."

"I don't think he ever has," said Maurice. "However, as I have no animosity against

him, I can promise you that it will make no difference."

Later in the evening Maurice strolled down to the Barracks intending to speak to the man in question on the subject of his departure.

Three of the overseers and two of the Jackeroos were present in the living-room, and a heated discussion was in progress. The air was thick with tobacco smoke, and Bailey's voice was predominant.

"I don't care what you say," he was protesting, "I contend that, if only the truth were known, the percentage is in my favour. It stands to reason it must be. You judge from the celebrated instances that have come before the world's eye."

"I judge from the records," said Snelling, in a contemptuous fashion. "Let us put it to Mr. Patterson."

"What is it I am to decide?" said Maurice, filling his pipe as he spoke. "I hope it is nothing very difficult."

"Bailey wants to argue that a greater number of criminals are brought to Justice than those that escape. I say that it can't be so. Look at the crimes that are never heard of, and others that are heard of, and in which the perpetrators manage to get

safely out of England without being arrested. What became of the Whitechapel murderer? Where is the person who killed that young woman on the London and South Western Railway? Where is Sir Maurice Ogilvie who assassinated that Music Hall girl in her brougham, in order to become possessed of her jewellery?"

Though Maurice had an inkling of what was coming and tried to nerve himself for it, his effort resulted in complete failure. A wave of the greatest fear swept over him, which he felt was being reflected in his face. During Snelling's speech he had lighted a match, which he now allowed to burn out between his fingers.

"You surely must remember the Great Plantagenet Case," said Snelling, looking at him. "It created a tremendous sensation at the time. The man who committed the murder, Sir Maurice Ogilvie, managed to effect his escape, and has never been heard of since."

"I recollect the case perfectly," said Maurice, who had by this time recovered his composure. "As you say, it caused a great sensation. However, I haven't come down to speak to you about that," he continued. "Mr. Sher-

rard tells me you are thinking of going off for a holiday. When do you want to leave ? ”

“ I thought of next Friday’s coach,” Snelling answered, “ I suppose there will be no objection ? ”

“ None whatever,” returned Maurice.

Then, having given instructions to one of the overseers, he went to his own quarters which were on the other side of the building. He could not forgive himself for having been so weak as to have allowed a casual mention of Connie’s death to have affected him as it had done. He wondered whether Snelling had really noticed it, and, if so, whether he suspected anything. He could not help feeling glad that the man was going away, if only for a short time

On the Friday following, Snelling took his departure for the South in the lumbering mail coach, that passed the station once every three weeks. On the next day, Saturday, Miss Sherrard made her first appearance in public, a poor wan ghost of her former self. She was seated on the verandah, well wrapped in shawls, when Maurice had his first interview with her. He went forward to greet her, for the moment scarcely knowing what

to say or how to act. She gave him her little hand, and smiled as she looked up at him.

"If it had not been for you," she said, "I should not be sitting here now. It seems so little to say—I thank you"

"Then please don't say it," he answered. "If you owe me your life remember I also owe you mine. I am so thankful to see you up again. You have made us all very anxious."

"I am afraid you have all thought more kindly of me than I deserve," she said. "I have only my own folly to thank for my illness. Had I not insisted on accompanying papa that day I should not have endangered your life and my own. Oh, how brave you were!"

"Brave? Not a bit of it. It was you who were brave in entrusting yourself so implicitly to me"

Then he realized that they were getting on dangerous ground. On many occasions since that eventful morning he had wondered whether she had heard the last words that passed his lips before his hold of the bough loosened, and he became unconscious. It seemed almost like sacrilege to her, that he should ever have allowed himself to utter them.

Before she could say anything further her father appeared on the scene. .

"Well, Patterson," he said. "What do you think of Nina? She is looking better already, is she not?" Then stroking his daughter's cheek he added: "I hope you have thanked our friend here for all he did for you?"

"He refuses to be thanked, papa," she answered. "He tries to make me believe that he did nothing out of the common. But I know differently. I shall be grateful to him all the days of my life."

Mr. Sherrard held out his hand to Maurice. It was all he could do, for his heart was too full for speech. The situation was an embarrassing one, and I fancy none of them were particularly sorry when a nurse appeared with a cup of beef-tea for the patient.

From that day Miss Sherrard continued to make satisfactory progress, and at last it was deemed possible for the doctor and the nurses to return to civilisation.

It was only when Nina was able to go where she pleased, and no longer to consider herself an invalid that Maurice noticed a change in her demeanour towards himself. It was not that she avoided him, or that she

was in any way unkind to him, but there was an indefinable something about her treatment of himself that he was quite at a loss to understand. He was not aware that he had offended her, and yet her manner seemed to imply that he had.

Even her father noticed it, and one day took her to task regarding it.

"Has Patterson hurt your feelings in any way, my dear?" he inquired. "I am sure he would not have done so intentionally."

"Of course he has not," she replied. "Why should you think that?"

"Because your treatment of him has been so different of late from what it used to be," Mr. Sherrard replied. "I fancy he must have noticed it."

Her face flushed crimson.

"I don't know why you should say such a thing," she rejoined hotly. "I hope I am always polite to Mr. Patterson."

"Polite? Yes, dear, you are certainly always that. But there was a time when you were friendlier with him than it seems to me you are now."

"I will try to make amends, papa," she answered humbly, with trembling lips, and

then was about to leave the room. At the door she paused and turned to her father again. "Oh, papa, papa," she cried, "I am so unhappy."

A moment later she was sobbing in his arms. But do what he would her father could not extract from her any explanation as to what ailed her. Manlike he failed to be able to read between the lines, and attributed her breakdown to weakness after her long illness. That evening, after dinner, Maurice encountered Nina in the garden alone. She had been particularly quiet with him at luncheon, and, as he had been called out on the Run during the afternoon, and had not returned in time for the evening meal, she had had no opportunity of making amends to him since her interview with her father. It was her intention, however, to do so now.

"Good evening, Mr. Patterson," she said, with a cheeriness that made him look at her in surprise. "You were not with us at dinner. We missed you, papa and I."

He could not have sworn to it, but he had an idea that she laid a little more stress than usual on the pronoun.

"I wonder if I ought to say that I am glad or sorry to hear that," he answered.

"I had no idea my presence would have made any difference."

"You are too modest," she said. "Of course, you know, papa and I always enjoy your society."

Again he was not certain about the inflection on the pronoun. There was a pause which lasted for upwards of a minute. Then Miss Sherrard turned to her companion, and looking him in the face said deliberately:—

"Mr. Patterson, will you forgive me?"

"My dear Miss Sherrard," he answered, "if there is anything I have to forgive I will do so with all the willingness in the world. Unhappily, however, at present I am not conscious of having the right to such a prerogative."

"But you must have considered me very rude of late. Believe me, I did not intend to be so."

"I should never have thought of such a thing," he returned. "You have always been kinder to me than I deserve."

"Then will you forgive me, and let me give you this as a peace offering?"

As she spoke she stooped and picked a flower from the bed beside which they were standing and presented it to him. He took

it, and, as he did so his face grew very pale. Hers, on the contrary, though he could not see it in the moonlight, had flushed a rosy red.

"This shall never leave my possession as long as I live," he said.

There was another pause, during which Maurice's heart thumped like a wheat flail. Then he placed the flower in his coat. I fancy she waited, in the hope that he might say more, but he managed to keep himself in check. It would have needed but a small temptation to have induced him to confess his love. But he knew that if he did so, his service with her father must come to an end, and that he must go away and never look upon her face again. For a moment the Tempter stood behind him, whispering in his ear that if he pleased he could win her for his wife, and that it was within the bounds of possibility that the awful suspicion, which now clouded his name, might some day be proved to be groundless. With an effort, however, he put the thought from him. He would be indeed unworthy of her love if he could dream for a moment of promoting his own happiness at the expense of what might ultimately prove to be the ruin of her life.

Seeing that Maurice had nothing more to

say to her, Miss Sherrard continued her walk down the path and then went into the house and made her way to her room. She did not appear again that night.

After the episode just described the days sped rapidly by until at last the time came for Mr. Sherrard and his daughter to contemplate returning to Sydney.

On the day before they left, Miss Sherrard stated a desire to ride out to the hut which had been built for the Boundary Rider, whose wife and children had so mercifully escaped when Maurice and Nina had so nearly met their deaths. Mr. Sherrard had a number of letters to write to catch the mail that evening, and was unable to accompany her, whereupon she extended the invitation to Maurice. He knew that it would be the wiser plan to invent an excuse, but for the life of him he could not do so. The temptation to spend a little more time with the woman he loved was too great to be resisted. He knew that on the morrow she was leaving the Station, and that, in all probability, another year would elapse before he should see her again. For this reason every moment he was able to pass in her company was more precious to him than anything in the world.

They left the homestead shortly after two o'clock and reached the hut, which had been erected some ten miles nearer the Station, at half-past three. After a stay of an hour there they began their ride home. Both were, without doubt, in a nervous state. They were talkative and silent by turns. There was one matter, however, that neither touched upon, and that was the young lady's departure on the morrow. By the time half the journey was accomplished the intervals of silence had grown longer and more frequent. At last they came to the subject to which I have just referred, and which both knew was inevitable.

"I am afraid your life up here must be very lonely, Mr. Patterson!" Miss Sherard remarked.

"I have my work," Maurice answered, "and that interests me to the exclusion of all else."

"I am sorry to hear you say that," she continued, toying with her reins, and looking down. "I had hoped that you would think sometimes of us."

This was an unkind remark, but she had an uphill fight before her, and could not afford to show mercy.

"I don't think that is quite fair to me," he returned. "I fancy you know as well as I do that I shall always think of *you*."

"I wonder if that is the truth?" she replied "I gave you a flower. You promised to keep it. Where is it now?"

He took from his pocket a small leather-covered note-book and showed her the flower reposing between its pages.

"You have not lost it, then?" she said. "I wonder how long you will keep it?"

"As I told you when you gave it to me—to my dying day," he answered very solemnly.

There was another pause. She knew as well as you do, my dear Mrs Grundy, that she was behaving in a most forward and unmaidenly fashion; but believe me, she also knew which you probably would not have done, the reasons which were actuating the man and making him behave as he was doing. She knew his pride, and she also knew of his love for herself. Unlike so many maidens, she valued her own happiness, and his, more than false modesty.

"Mr. Patterson," she continued, "I am going to interfere in your private concerns once more, Marakandah is a comfortable station. Mr. Drayton had a happy home there

for many years. Why don't you marry and settle down? Would you not be much happier?"

He looked at her in complete surprise. Was she serious or jesting?

"I shall never marry," he answered.

"And why not?"

"Do you want me to be candid, or shall I tell you an untruth?"

"I don't think you would do that," she returned. "Why will you not marry, then?"

"Because I cannot marry *you*!" he answered, quietly, but firmly.

"Mr. Patterson!"

"Miss Sherrard, you asked me, and I answered you. Heaven alone knows I had never intended to tell you. Forgive me if I have offended you, and forget that the words were ever spoken."

"But I cannot forget," she cried piteously. "Oh! why are you so proud? Why will you make me speak? We go away to-morrow, and you and I may not meet again, perhaps for years. It is possible we may never do so again. I know that you love me, and that you are too proud to tell me so, because my father is your employer. Will

you not forget that there is that difference between us ? ”

“ Nina,” he said, and the word came very softly from his lips. “ I love you more truly, I think, than woman was ever loved before. If such a thing had been possible I should have told you of my love, and have asked you to be my wife long since. But it is out of the question. So much so, indeed, that I shudder to think what your opinion of me would be if you knew everything. Your life could never be linked with mine.”

“ Say what you like,” she answered, “ but you will never convince me that you have done anything of which I should be ashamed.”

“ Heaven bless you for your trust in me,” he continued. “ No, I have done nothing that I should object to your knowing. But I was accused of a deed that, if it should be known where I am at this moment, would cut me off for ever from my fellow-man.”

She gave a little moaning cry.

“ Oh ! how unhappy you must have been ! But what does it matter to me of what you have been suspected ? I know you are innocent, and still, if you will have me, I will be your wife.”

“ My love, it could never be. You are the

one bright star in my firmament of darkness. Shine on me, but from afar. I must lead my life as Fate has mapped it out for me."

"But I cannot let you go," she sobbed.

"Listen, Nina," he said, "and hear what I am about to say to you. Six years ago a woman was murdered in London. She was an actress, and a well-known society man was supposed to have committed the crime. For another reason, which had nothing whatsoever to do with the deed, that man ran away from England. He had been about to make a wealthy marriage, and, at the last moment, the lady jilted him. He knew that he was ruined, and, like a coward, he fled the country. I was that man!"

"And—and—your name?"

"Maurice Ogilvie!"

"You—Sir Maurice Ogilvie?"

"Yes, I am Sir Maurice Ogilvie—the man for whom the police have been searching both Hemispheres. Now you can see why I say that our marriage is impossible. I could not ask you to be my wife"

She turned to him and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Maurice," she said, "mine is no fair-weather love. You are innocent of the charge

they have brought against you. I am as certain of that as if I had seen the—the — awful act committed. Once more I ask you to let me be your wife ? ”

“ Dear love,” he said, “ you do not know what you ask ! But this is what I will do. Your father is my friend. To-night I will tell him everything. Will you agree to act as he decides ? ”

“ Cannot I decide for myself ? ”

“ No. He must be the arbiter ! ”

CHAPTER XII

ON the last evening of their stay at Marakandah Mr. Sherrard and his daughter dined alone. No one seemed quite to know what had become of Maurice. He had not been seen by any one at the Station since his return from escorting the owner's daughter to the Boundary Rider's hut. Nina was the only person who could have enlightened her father upon the subject, but she did not do so. She sat down to the meal, and tried to appear her usual self, but the effort was a disastrous failure. Before it was half finished she broke down, and had to retire to her own room. Her father tried to elicit from her the reason of her trouble, she put him off, however, with the excuse that she would tell him later.

As for Maurice, as soon as he had given up his horse, he strode away down the track beside the river. He walked like a man dazed, scarcely conscious of what he was

doing. The heaviest load of all his life was upon his shoulders that night. What could he do? He loved Nina with a passionate devotion that was more than life itself. He knew more than a little of the noble spirit the girl possessed, and he was aware that, having once given him her love, she would count no sacrifice too great to prove its value. But, he could not accept such generosity; it was out of the question that he should do so. Who knew what lay before him? His identity might at any moment be discovered, with the result that he would be arrested, and in the end, in all human probability, pay the penalty for crime which he had never committed. Eventually he reached the spot where they had been rescued from the flood. The river had now receded half a mile from the place. He walked towards the tree to the bough of which he had clung, and where he had first confessed his love. How much had happened since that dreadful morning! Perhaps it would have been better if he had perished when he fell back into the flood. Then at least Nina might always have remembered him with gratitude. But he was wrong, and, what was more, he wronged her. She *was* grateful

and she always would be. Sitting down at the foot of the tree he covered his face with his hands. He was thankful he had at least resisted temptation that day. But his interview with Mr. Sherrard still lay before him.

At last he rose, and began his walk back to the homestead. It was nearly nine o'clock when he arrived there. He shut the familiar gate behind him, and went slowly up the path towards the verandah. He found his employer seated there, but there was no sign of Nina.

"Mr. Sherrard," said Maurice, when he stood before the other, "may I have a few moments' conversation with you?"

"Why not, my dear Patterson?" said the other. "If you cannot, who could? What is it you have to say to me? There is nothing wrong, I hope?"

"I am afraid there is something very wrong," said Maurice gravely. "But you will be a better judge when I have told you everything. Perhaps it would be as well, if you do not mind, that we should go inside, where we should run no risk of being overheard."

"Let us go into the house, then," said Mr. Sherrard, rising from his chair and moving

towards the French windows of the dining-room, which were open. A lamp was burning on the table, and Maurice noticed that Nina had left a pair of gloves upon the side-board

"Now," said Mr. Sherrard, "what is it you have to say to me?"

Maurice hesitated a moment before he replied. Then he found his voice.

"You have known me now for some time," he said, "and you should be able to judge my character. I am not asking for a compliment, but I should be grateful if you would give me an unbiassed opinion as to what you think of me."

"I like you, and you know it," the other replied. "I trust you, and you know that also. If there is anything I can do to prove it, try me, and I don't think you'll find me wanting."

"Would it surprise you to hear that I am not the man I have made out to be?"

"I have been convinced of it ever since I have known you," returned Mr. Sherrard. "When I first saw you on board the *Fotheringay*, I could see that you were of a rank superior to the rest of the crew."

"And you were right. I have come to put my case before you to-night and to ask

your advice. My name is not Patterson—it is Ogilvie—Sir Maurice Ogilvie; I am the last of an ancient race, formerly respected in England.” He paused to see if his name conveyed any idea to the man before him

“Ogilvie?” said the other thoughtfully. “It seems to me that I remember something connected with that name. I cannot, however, recollect what it was.”

“I think I can assist you,” said Maurice. “You may recall the fact that on the day before you left England in the *Fotheringay*, a terrible murder was committed in London. A prominent music-hall artist was done to death in her brougham, while on her way from the ‘National’ to the ‘Excelsior.’”

“I remember the case perfectly, now you speak of it. It was supposed that some well-known man about town had committed the crime for the sake of the diamonds she wore.”

There was another short silence, and then Maurice said, very quietly: “The name of the man suspected of that crime was Ogilvie.”

“But not you? You cannot mean that you had any hand in it?”

“I had not! Nevertheless, I am the man upon whom the suspicion rests.”

Mr. Sherrard took two or three hasty turns up and down the room.

"Patterson—for I feel that I must still call you by that name—you must have some grave reason for telling me this. You know that you can trust me with your secret implicitly, but I must confess that I cannot understand why you have made me your confidant."

"Because, sir, I have promised some one else to place the whole matter before you, and to abide by your decision, whatever the cost to myself may be. Let me tell you my story. The murdered girl was at that time probably the most popular music-hall favourite in England. I had known her for some years, and she and I were great friends. Then I became engaged to a lady whose father promised to give us a hundred thousand pounds on our wedding day. That day did not arrive for my *fiancée* ran away from her home, and was married to a cousin in the North of England. My estates were gone; I had spent everything I possessed, and, knowing I was hopelessly ruined, I resolved to quit England there and then, and to begin a new life elsewhere. Before doing so, however, I went to say 'good-bye' to Miss

Plantagenet. I drove with her in her brougham from the 'National' Music Hall. She was affected at thought of my leaving England, and offered to accompany me. Upon my saying that I could not hear of it, and finding that I had very little money, she offered to share with me all she had made. Once more I had to decline. A little later I realized that she was growing hysterical, and, knowing that if I said farewell to her at the theatre she might collapse altogether, and be unable to fulfil her engagement, I bade her good-bye in her carriage. A little more than half-way between the 'National' and the 'Excelsior' I alighted from the vehicle into the street. That was the last I saw of her. I sold the ring I had given Miss Gardiner, added the amount to my slender capital, and then left London by the midnight train for Liverpool. I sold my clothes to a Jew, and purchased what I should require for a voyage. After that I went in search of a ship, and eventually found myself on board the *Fotheringay*, bound for Australia. The rest you know. Now do you believe me guilty of the crime which has been attributed to me?"

"No, I do not," the other replied. "I shall never believe it. I have seen too much

of you ever to think that you could commit such a diabolical act. I am afraid, however, that you made matters worse for yourself when you ran away."

"But, sir, you must remember that when I left London I was not aware that the murder had been committed. I imagined the girl to be as well as when I had last seen her."

"But, once more, let me ask you why you have told me?"

"Because, Mr. Sherrard, a terrible thing has happened to-day. I must admit to you that I have long loved your daughter. I beg of you not to interrupt me until I have finished. I vowed that she should never learn of my love. But on that morning when we thought death was certain, and only a matter of a few moments, I said more than perhaps I should have done. When I came round, and was able to think the matter over, I repented bitterly of my indiscretion, and vowed to myself that I would never breathe another word to her on the subject again. Nor should I ever have done so had she not spoken to me on the subject to-day."

"My daughter spoke to you?"

"She loves me as I love her! She proved it by offering to share my misery with me. I

told her that such a thing was impossible, but she would not hear the word. I then induced her to allow me to place the matter before you, on the understanding that we should both abide by your decision."

"This is a terrible situation! What am I to do?"

"Take her away to-morrow, and teach her to forget me. It would be better so. While this stain is on my name, no woman could ever be my wife—much less your daughter."

"She will not forget. She is not the sort of girl who can forget her lover in a week. And what of yourself?"

"I must go away, and once more find refuge in a place where I and my past are unknown"

"But is there no chance, do you think, of your being able to disprove the charge?"

Maurice shook his head.

"I fear not. Too long a period has elapsed. The man who killed the poor little thing and robbed her of her jewels may be dead by this time. No, I fear there is no hope for me."

"Heaven help you both," said Mr. Sherard. "Do you intend seeing her before you go?"

"I shall leave here at daybreak, as I have some work to do in the Back Country. I think it would be better for her that she should not see me."

The two men shook hands.

"When would you wish me to leave here?" asked Maurice.

"I do not wish you to leave at all," Mr. Sherrard replied. "Why should I? You are as safe here as you would be anywhere else. No one suspects your secret, and you know that I believe in you."

"But your daughter? What of her? You will want to pay your usual visit and she will accompany you. She and I must not meet again."

"Let us wait until that time comes. Neither of us knows what the Future may have in store for us? Remember one thing always, and that is that, happen what may, I am your friend. All I have is at your disposal, and your battle for honour shall be as my own. When I say this I mean it."

"How can I thank you? How can I thank you?" said Maurice earnestly. Then, turning and facing his loyal friend, he continued: "Mr. Sherrard, were it not for this, and had I come to you as plain William

Patterson, what chance should I have stood of obtaining your daughter's hand ? ”

“ If she loved you, and I felt convinced that you loved her, you should have had her with ten thousand blessings upon your heads. As it is, I shall not rest happy until I have proved your innocence. There are clever men to be found in England who should surely be able to unravel this mystery. Their services shall be employed, and we will see with what result. The arrangements shall be conducted in such a way that it shall not be known who is making the inquiries.”

“ You are more than good to me.”

“ No, I am only doing my duty towards my friend. And now let us talk of other matters.”

For the next half-hour they busied themselves with the affairs of the Station, and then Maurice rose to bid his employer “ good-night ” and good-bye.

“ Keep up a good heart,” said the squatter as they shook hands ; “ all may come right yet. And bear it in mind always that there are at least two people in the world who have the firmest belief in your innocence.”

Next morning, when Maurice mounted his horse at dawn and rode past the homestead, in which he had spent so many happy hours,

he looked at it with a feeling that was very near akin to despair. How desolate it would seem to him when he returned to it again. Nina would be gone. There would be no more pleasant chats on the verandah, no more music from the well-worn piano, and no more rides or walks together. He had turned the corner of the garden and was approaching the little side gate with its avenue of trellis vines, when he heard his name pronounced. He looked round and there, standing only a few yards from him, was the girl he had vowed he would never see again. Her face looked up so imploringly at him in the half-light of day that all his resolutions vanished in a trice.

"Maurice," she said again, and then added, "surely you will speak to me?"

Dismounting from his horse, and throwing the reins over his arm, Maurice approached the gate.

"Nina," he said, "what madness is this? I promised your father last night I would not see you again."

"He told me that," she answered, "but I said I must see you, and it was he who informed me of your early departure this morning. Oh, Maurice, was it kind?"

"I could not help it," he pleaded. "I thought it was better so. Last night I told your father my story."

"And he knows, as I do," she replied, "that you are innocent. He is going to do his best to prove it."

What he said to her after that is too sacred to be printed here ; but had there been any spectator he would have noticed that when Maurice rode on his way there was a look of hope upon his face that had not been there when he approached the gate. Moreover, on the little finger of his left hand there was a something that he had never worn before.

When he returned that evening it was to find the house empty. On the chimney-piece in the dining-room were two letters addressed to himself. One was from Mr. Sherrard, and bade him keep up a good heart, for he had trusty friends, and all would be well in the end.

The other he read over and over again before he placed it in his pocket. As he did so he heard a footstep in the verandah, and turning found himself confronted by Snelling.

"Ah, Snelling," said Maurice, "so you

have returned? I hope you have had a pleasant holiday?"

"Only so so," grumbled the other. "It takes a week to get down and a week to get back, and when you're there, everybody looks down on you because you're a blooming Bushman, and can't bow and scrape like a counter-jumper or a Civil Service clerk."

Maurice gathered from this that the gentleman in question had been making himself as agreeable at the Metropolis as he was accustomed to do in the Bush.

From that day forward, for upwards of six months, life at Marakandah progressed in its usual quiet fashion. Shearing was fast approaching again, and the preparations for this important event necessitated a vast amount of attention. During that time Maurice received no letters from Nina, but the numerous books and papers that reached him were sufficient proof that he was not out of her thoughts. What progress Mr. Sherrard was making in his inquiries he had not heard, but he knew enough of his employer to feel sure that the promise he had given would be strictly adhered to.

One afternoon he rode down to the woolshed, to superintend the billeting of the teams

of certain carriers, who had come up in anticipation of the freights they would receive, for the conveyance of the wool to the nearest railway terminus. He was detained at the shed somewhat longer than he had expected to be, and in consequence it was nearly dusk when he set out on his return to the homestead. He had crossed what was called the River Paddock, and was walking his horse on the softest part of the track when, on turning a corner, he became aware of two men before him. One, on foot, was Snelling. The other, a smallish man with a pointed beard and wearing a pith helmet, was a stranger. He had a valise, evidently a new one, strapped on his saddle before him, and whatever else he may have been, he was certainly not an accomplished horseman. It was evident, however, that he had ridden some distance that day, and also that he intended to camp at the Head Station that night. Whether Snelling and he were old acquaintances Maurice had no means of finding out, but they certainly appeared to be on the best of terms.

"This gentleman has come up to us with a letter of introduction from the owner," said Snelling as Maurice rode up to them.

"Indeed," returned Maurice, "In that case let me offer you a hearty welcome, Mr. _____"

"My name is Berridge," the man replied "Unfortunately my letter of introduction is in my valise. I am in Australia as the representative of an English Literary Syndicate, whose aim is, by a series of judicious articles, to attempt to draw the bonds of Empire tighter than they have been in the past. I had the good fortune to meet Mr. Sherrard in Sydney, whereupon he invited me to inspect his various properties and to write articles concerning them."

"In that case I shall be very pleased to give you all the information in my power," said Maurice.

Half-an-hour later, when the stranger had washed off the stains of travel, he made his appearance on the verandah of the homestead, carrying the letter of introduction which he handed to Maurice. The letter Maurice opened and read as follows.

"DEAR PATTERSON,

"The bearer of this letter, Mr. Berridge, is in Australia collecting information for certain English newspapers. He has expressed a

desire to see Marakandah, and I am therefore giving him this note to you. I know you will help him in any way you can.

“Sincerely yours,

“WILLIAM SHERRARD”

“I hope you will let me know what I can do for you,” said Maurice to the stranger, as he placed the letter in his pocket. “Any information I am able to give you is at your service.”

“You are very good,” replied the journalist “I shall look forward with great pleasure to my stay.”

During the next few days Maurice escorted the new-comer to all the places of interest upon the Station. The latter appeared to be much impressed and made many notes in his pocket-book, and prophesied that he would open the eyes of the British Reading Public to the wonderful wealth of the Australian colonies. On one occasion he declared that horses were his favourite livestock, and mentioned the name of the winner of the Heavy Weight Hunter’s Championship at the Richmond Horse Show in 189—.

“Pardon me,” said Maurice quietly, “I think Knight of Malta won it that year.”

"I am sorry to contradict you, but I fancy I am right."

Maurice laughed. "I shouldn't like you to bet with me on that matter," he said. "I am afraid you would lose your money. The reason I am so certain of my facts is that I happened to be showing a hack myself at Richmond that year."

"In that case I must defer to you," said the other, and changed the conversation.

Little did Maurice imagine the amount of mischief he had done himself

A few evenings later Berridge suggested a swim in the river, after a long ride.

Maurice willingly agreed, and they went down for their dip. That evening, when he was alone in his own room, Mr. Berridge consulted his pocket-book.

"Height about six feet, blue eyes, curly hair, blue and red dragon on left forearm, another in blue on right." Sir Maurice Ogilvie, "I fancy I have run you to earth at last."

Two days later Mr Berridge announced his intention of leaving the Station. He thanked every one for the kindness they had shown to him, and wished it were in his power to repeat his visit. After he had gone, Maurice noticed that there was a change in Snelling's

manner towards himself. He was not openly impertinent, and yet there was a curious something about his behaviour that he did not like and yet could not resent. It was as if the man expected a certain thing to happen, and yet could not express his satisfaction, as he did not quite know when it would come to pass. They were to begin shearing on the following Monday, and already a large number of hands had made their appearance in search of work.

After breakfast on the fifth morning following Berridge's departure, Maurice was at the store, talking to the book-keeper when he heard the sound of horses approaching. (The overseers were lounging about the verandah prior to commencing work after their meal) So many men had ridden up to the Station of late to put their names down on the shearing roster that neither of them paid very much attention to the new-comers. To Maurice's surprise, when he went out on the verandah, he discovered that one of them was no less a person than Berridge himself, while his companion was a stalwart police trooper. Berridge had dismounted, and now approached him.

"Sir Maurice Ogilvie," he said, "in the

Queen's name I arrest you on a charge of having, on June 21st, 189—, murdered one Constance Amelia Burt, better known as Constance Plantagenet. I warn you that anything you may say will be used as evidence against you."

CHAPTER XIII

It is a strange thing, yet nevertheless a well-known fact, that, as often as not when a blow that has long been dreaded falls, the effect for the moment upon the recipient is often not nearly so overwhelming as he, or she, had expected it would be. This must have been the case with Maurice, for when the blow, which he had been dreading for years past, struck him, he alone of the little party that stood in the store verandah appeared to be unconcerned about it.

"And so, Mr. Berridge, we are to understand that you are not a newspaper reporter, after all?" he remarked very quietly. "You have certainly played your part admirably, and have taken me in most completely. I can now understand why we had that argument about the Richmond Horse Show, and also why you were anxious that I should accompany you to the river to bathe that evening. Well, well, every man to his trade,

though I don't think I should care about yours. And now what do you want to do with me ? ”

“ It will be necessary for you to prepare to leave here at once,” the detective replied. “ We must get as far as the Township to-night. To-morrow we should reach Mandelong and there we shall take the train for Sydney. I want to get you to the latter place as soon as I can, in order to be able to catch the next mail-boat to England.”

Turning to Snelling, who had lately joined the party on the verandah, Maurice said :

“ As I am placed *hors de combat*, Snelling, you had better take over the charge of the station. I don't know whether you had any hand in this business—for your honour's sake, I hope not, but if you have you can congratulate yourself on the success that has attended your efforts. I suppose, Mr. Berridge, you will have no objection to my putting a few things together to take with me ? ”

“ Not in the least ” the detective replied ; “ that is, provided I am there when you do it.”

Maurice allowed a laugh to escape him.

“ You are afraid, I suppose,” he said, “ that I might be tempted to take a pistol and by it rob you of your chance of distinguishing yourself. Well, for my own sake, I

am not likely to do that. Remember, until I am proved guilty, I am, practically speaking, innocent. Now shall we go to the house ? ”

The detective assenting, they made their way to the house. Once there, Maurice called his house-keeper to him.

“ Mrs. Macpherson,” he said, “ you will be surprised, I know, to hear that I have been arrested on a charge of murder ? ”

“ Heaven save us sir ! What’s the meaning of this ? ” cried the old woman, lifting her hands and eyes in consternation. “ Where’s the man who dares to say such a thing against you ? You wouldn’t do it, I know, sir ”

“ Nevertheless, they’ve seen fit to charge me with the crime,” returned Maurice. “ It will be necessary for me, therefore, to leave here with this gentleman to-day. I shall want to take a few necessary articles of clothing and other things with me. The remainder of my belongings you can pack up and send on to Sydney, to the care of Mr. Sherrard ”

“ I am sorry to be obliged to do it, but I must run over your possessions before you touch anything,” said Berridge. “ I don’t want to inconvenience you more than I can help, but it’s part of my duty, you see, and

if I neglect it, I shall be called over the coals pretty sharply at the other end."

"Hoity, toity! What impudence to be sure!" Mrs. Macpherson put in, with a toss of her head. Then, addressing Berridge, she went on. "If I'd only a' knowed what you was after, my man, when you come up here I can tell you you wouldn't have had the civility given you as I showed. No, that you wouldn't. Buttons stitched on, socks darned, and shirts washed, and then to come and take Mr. Patterson away on a charge like this. I scorn you, that I do!"

"Never mind, Mrs Macpherson, it cannot be helped," said Maurice. "Mr. Berridge is only doing his duty. And now, my friend, you had better see if you can find anything incriminating among my goods and chattels."

As it turned out nothing in any way bearing upon William Patterson's connexion with Maurice Ogilvie could be found among his effects. When the inspection had been completed, Maurice packed a valise with a few necessities and then announced himself as ready to take the road.

"Before we start, I had better, perhaps, give a few hints to the man who is going to take my place," he said to the detective. "There

are two or three matters to which it will be necessary for him to give his most careful attention."

They crossed the little open square to the store, where they found Snelling and the book-keeper having some words together. As I said at the end of the previous chapter, a knot of overseers and hands were grouped on the verandah. They were now discussing the matter of their manager's arrest.

"By the way, Snelling," said Maurice, "before I go I should like to say that I think you had better move those sheep from the Fifteen-Mile Paddock into No. 8, and those from the Rocky Hill into No. 15. The water will probably last long enough that way."

"Excuse me," said Snelling, stiffly, "but I must really decline to discuss these matters with you. From the moment that you were arrested, you ceased to be Manager of this station. And, for my part, I may tell you that I am not accustomed to receive instructions from murderers."

This was too much for the book-keeper.

"If that's the way you are going to talk, Snelling," he said, "then all I can say is that you're a common cad, and I tell you

so to your face. You can do as you please in return for the information."

"By Heavens! You shall pay for this, Gregory!" thundered the other, his face suffused with passion. "I'll teach you to insult me."

"Never mind, Gregory," Maurice continued soothingly. "I know very well who my friends are, and, for that matter, my enemies also."

Then, holding out his hand, he bade the other good-bye. The man took it, and shook it warmly.

"Now, Mr. Berridge," continued Maurice, "if you are ready for the road, I am. By the way, what horse am I to have?"

"I've found one for you," said the other. "It belongs to the Station, and it will be returned from the Township to-morrow."

"You are evidently determined that I shall not escape," he said, with a bitter smile, after he had examined the horse he was to ride. "I fancy I could walk as fast as that animal can trot." Then, making his way to the little group of men at the end of the verandah, he shook them individually by the hand and bade them good-bye. This done he mounted, and announced himself as

being ready to set off. At this moment the book-keeper left the store and approached the group of men.

"Now, my lads, three hearty cheers for Mr. Patterson," he cried, "and show him by the way you give them that you don't for a moment believe the charge that has been brought against him. Three cheers, boys, and take your time from me."

The men gave the cheers required of them with a will, while Snelling scowled at them from the store-door.

"And now three groans for Snelling!" shouted some one in the background

Before these could be given, however, Snelling had stepped forward, and had held up his hand.

"Who's the man that said that?" he stormed, advancing threateningly upon them.

"Tell me, or I'll sack the whole lot of you!"

A big burly man, named Mackay, stepped forward and looked the speaker fairly in the face.

"I said it," he remarked quietly. "And if you'd like to hear it, I'll say it again. What did I hear you talking to that man about?" he continued, pointing to Berridge "on the night after he came up here? Didn't

I hear you say to him : ' Remember, if this comes off, and he is brought in guilty, I'm to have half the reward. Don't forget that ! You'd never have known he was up here if it hadn't been for me ' Strike me, you hound ! I'd take three months, and willing, to be allowed to dust my fist on your ugly face ! "

On hearing this threat, Snelling retired precipitately into the store, and closed the door behind him

Then, with the trooper on one side of him and the detective on the other, Maurice began his long journey. Where would it end ? was the question he asked himself.

Late in the afternoon they reached the small Township, and next day they found themselves at Mandelong, the terminus of the railway. Here they took the train. On the way, Berridge, who, in spite of his calling was not a bad-hearted fellow, did his best to make Maurice's unhappy lot as easy as he could. At Mandelong a detective from Brisbane joined them, and the trooper's services were dispensed with. Up to that time the news of his arrest had not been published in Brisbane, so they were able to pass through that city, take the train, and eventually reach Sydney without attracting public attention.

With what very different feelings did Maurice find himself once more an inhabitant of that great city? When he had last left it, it was in the vain hope that his identity would never be discovered in the wilds in which he was about to hide himself, and that he would be permitted to live out the rest of his life in peace. He had no idea then what he was going to do, his only desire being to separate himself from his miserable Past. Now he was returning, a man without hope, believing that the end of all things, so far as he was concerned, had come.

On arriving in Sydney he was placed in a cab and driven direct to the Metropolitan Police Station, where he was to remain until he was brought before the Magistrates, prior to being finally handed over to the detective for conveyance to England. He was seated in his cell with a heart as heavy as lead, thinking of the girl who loved him, and whose heart would break on his account when she heard what had happened to him, when the door was opened and no less a person than his old friend Harbridge, known in Sydney as Davidson, in the uniform of an inspector of police, entered. The door was closed behind him, and it was not until the steps of

the warder had died away in the stone passage outside that he spoke.

"My poor old Maurice," he began at last, advancing and placing his hand upon the other's shoulder. "To think that it should come to this Nobody knows how sorry I am for you."

"Never mind, George, old man," Maurice returned. "What's done can't be undone. Now, I want you to tell me when I shall be brought before the Magistrates?"

"To-morrow morning," Harbridge answered. "Berridge wants, if possible, to get away by this week's mail boat. So you can see there's not much time to lose."

"George, would it be possible for me to see a visitor, do you think?"

"Of course," the other answered, readily enough. "Why not? Who is it you want to see? Tell me his name and I'll send for him at once."

"It is my employer—Mr. Sherrard," Maurice answered. "I want to have a talk with him as soon as I can."

"He has been up here twice already to make inquiries about you," said Harbridge. "I tell you one thing, if he likes you, as I think he does, you have got a really good friend in him."

"Nobody knows that better than I do," Maurice returned. "I have been with him a long time. I'll tell you one thing now that may surprise you. Had it not been for this ghastly suspicion I should in all probability have married his daughter by this time. You needn't look shocked. Heaven help me! It's true quite. He knows all my past history."

"And what did he say when you told him about it?" Harbridge inquired.

"He, like yourself, believes in me, and so does his daughter. Though why any one should believe in such a worthless beggar as myself I cannot imagine."

"Because one has only to look into your face to see that you are not the sort of man to commit such a deed as that of which you stand accused," Harbridge replied. "I only wish I could see a way of helping you out of this trouble. Unfortunately, however, I can't. I fear it will be out of the question to make the Magistrates believe that you are not Sir Maurice Ogilvie."

"I shall not dispute that fact," Maurice answered. "It would be useless. No, all things considered, I think it would be better for the matter to be fought out now. In a

case like this there is nothing to be gained by postponing the evil day."

"I'd give my right hand to save you, Maurice. And I think you know it."

"I do know, old fellow," Maurice replied.

"You will not be able to do it, however, try how you will. Gad! we never thought it would come to this when we used to be such chums in the old Playing Fields? Sometimes it seems to me that the early part of my life must have been a sort of dream, from which I woke at the Governor's death. What times we used to have with the hounds! Do you recall the day when we chased the fox from Horton Spinney, and killed on the old parson's lawn? You and I were the first in at the death? I wonder what we should have said then had any one told us, that in after life I was destined to be hanged for murder and that you would be my gaoler?"

"For pity's sake, don't talk like that, Maurice," cried the other. "It cuts me to the heart to hear you. The experiences of the last few years would be calculated to make me a pretty hard and callous sort of man, but I can't stand that."

Maurice patted him gently on the shoulder.

"Never mind, old boy," he said "So long as you and the others don't think me guilty I don't care very much what the world in general thinks They'll make a nine days' wonder of it and then forget it on the tenth. By the way, I've forgotten to congratulate you. I'm glad to see you've climbed the tree You're an Inspector now, and I suppose no end of a swell "

"Leave me out of the question, there's a good fellow," said Harbridge "It only serves to remind me what I am, and that's just what I want to forget. And now about Mr Sherrard. I'll send word to him that you are here, and you shall see him as soon as he arrives "

Maurice thanked him for his kindness, after which the other withdrew.

Half-an-hour later Mr. Sherrard made his appearance at the police-station, and was shown to the cell where his late manager was confined

"My poor lad," he said, seating himself beside Maurice immediately they were alone together. "You don't know how terribly grieved I am about this. I thought you were so safe How could they have discovered your whereabouts? "

"I fancy I can hazard a very good guess," Maurice replied. "But if you will excuse me I would rather not talk about it just now. It would do no sort of good as things are. The man's conscience will be his own punishment."

"I, like you, have my suspicions," said Mr. Sherrard. "In time they will doubtless be confirmed. It will be a bad day for that man when they are. But now about yourself. I have already engaged the services of the best Lawyer and Counsel in Sydney. You may be sure we shall do our best to prevent your being taken from the Colony."

"Please don't do anything of the kind," Maurice answered. "The proof that the detectives have against me is too strong to be refuted, and what is more I shall not deny it. And now tell me about Nina—I beg your pardon, of your daughter. You can imagine how full my thoughts have been of her."

"She wanted to come to you at once," said Mr. Sherrard, "but for many reasons I thought it better that she should not. She has not been over strong of late, and I was afraid of the effect it would have upon her. To tell the truth, Ogilvie, she has been fretting herself terribly about you. I fear lest

this terrible climax might set the seal upon her "

"Is there no way of keeping the news from her?" Maurice inquired.

"I do not think so," said Mr. Sherrard. "In fact, I am certain there is not. She had heard of your arrival in Sydney, and I left her very much cast down"

"My poor girl!" said Maurice to himself. "Heaven help me! What misery I bring upon every one with whom I am brought into contact!"

When Mr. Sherrard left the police-station he made his way home with a heavy heart. To the last Maurice had resolutely declined to avail himself of the other's offer of legal assistance. It seemed therefore that there was nothing to prevent him from being shipped to England in the out-going mail-boat. Reaching his own house the squatter made his way to his daughter's boudoir, where he found her pacing the room distractedly.

"What have you to tell me, papa?" she asked, holding out her hands as if in piteous entreaty. "Have you seen him? Tell me all for mercy's sake"

"Yes, I have seen him," her father an-

swered, leading her to a seat. "He was more cheerful than I expected to find him. He sent his love to you, and says that he hopes for the best."

This was a little fabrication on Mr. Sherard's part, but he could not refrain from uttering it.

"Papa, I must see Maurice without delay," Nina said at last. "If I don't I believe I shall lose my reason. Oh, do help me to do as I wish, papa. You don't know what it means to me."

"You shall see him if it can be managed," said her father. "But not if you distress yourself like this. The doctors would not allow it. And you know that everything depends upon them."

"If they prevent me from seeing him they will kill me," she cried impetuously. "I tell you, papa, my life depends upon my seeing Maurice before they take him away."

"Well, well, my darling, leave it to me, and I will see what can be done."

Next morning Maurice was brought before the Magistrates. The news of this arrest had reached the papers, and in consequence the Court was crowded to its utmost holding capacity. As many members of the fashion-

able world as could obtain admittance did so, with the desire of seeing the famous Sir Maurice Ogilvie, the man of fashion, the friend of Royalty, and, more than all, the man who was accused of the crime of murdering the famous London Music Hall singer. Despite Maurice's entreaties, a well-known barrister had been engaged by Mr Sherrard to watch his interests. This, however, did not prevent Maurice from declaring that he was none other than the man whose name was mentioned in the warrant produced by the English detective for his arrest. The proceedings were very brief, extending in all to something less than half-an-hour. Then the customary documents were made out, and Maurice was formally handed over to the charge of Berridge, for conveyance to the Mother Country. The mail-boat was due to sail on the following morning.

That afternoon Harbridge entered Maurice's cell and informed him that Mr. Sherrard and a lady had called to see him.

"Is there anything to prevent my seeing visitors?" Maurice asked.

"Nothing," his friend replied. "Berridge has no objection, and I am sure I have none. I only wish I could do more for you."

"Then, for Heaven's sake, let me see her and get it over," said Maurice. His face had turned as white as death. Then, to himself, he added: "Poor little Nina! What can I say to comfort her? Heaven help me! This interview is likely to be a painful one for both of us!"

Harbridge had meanwhile withdrawn, and almost immediately afterwards there was a rustle of skirts, and Nina entered the cell. With a piteous cry she threw herself into her lover's arms, and clung to him as if she were determined never to leave him again. For more than a minute neither of them spoke. Then she raised her streaming eyes to Maurice's face.

"My love, my own dear love," she cried "what can I say to comfort you? O Maurice, Maurice, what can I say?"

"Say only that you love me, dear, and that you still believe in my innocence," he replied.

"I should do that against the testimony of all the world," she answered. "Nothing will ever shake my belief in your innocence. You would not be my own true lover if you were as guilty as they say."

He did his best to soothe her, but it was

a well-nigh hopeless task. For upwards of half-an-hour they talked together. Of their farewell I can tell you nothing. No description of it has been, or ever will be, given to me. All I do know is that when the time came for them to part, Nina was carried in a fainting condition from her lover's cell, and was laid upon the sofa in the inspector's room. As soon as she reached her father's house again, a doctor were sent for, and an hour later her condition was declared to be serious.

"She must be kept absolutely quiet," said the medical gentleman "Excitement of any kind at this juncture may prove fatal. I regret having to say so, but there is very grave danger of brain fever setting in. The shock she has received to-day has been a severe one, and, coming on the top of this general weakness, has had an easier victory than it would otherwise have won. I shall send you two nurses to-night, one of whom must be with your daughter continually."

Next morning Maurice was conducted on board the mail-boat at an early hour. He and Berridge were to share the same cabin, and for the next six weeks were to spend their lives in the most dismal of intimate asso-

ciations. It was far from a pleasant period to look forward to, the more so as Maurice was aware that every one on board knew of the charge against him. At noon the great steamer left the quay, and made her way slowly out into the bay, From his port-hole Maurice could catch a glimpse of Mr. Sherrard's house, perched on the hill above one of the many lovely bays that grace what is, to my mind, the most beautiful harbour in the world. Nina was under that roof, doubtless thinking of him, and watching the vessel disappear, carrying with it the man she loved so well. A few minutes later the house was lost to his view, and he sat himself down on his cabin locker and buried his face in his hands

Had Nina gone out of his life for ever ?

CHAPTER XIV

ALL through the week that followed Maurice's departure from Sydney, Miss Sherrard's condition was decidedly serious. The gravest mental troubles were feared, and doctors and nurses were in constant attendance upon her. Her father's anxiety knew no bounds. He perambulated the house and the gardens like a madman, willing to do anything that lay in his power, but knowing himself to be powerless to avert the impending catastrophe.

On the day that the newspapers had announced the fact that the mail-boat had left Albany for Colombo, he was sitting in his daughter's room, watching the pale face upon the pillow, when she suddenly sat up and looked fixedly at him.

"Papa," she said, "I know that you love me. Do you want to save my life?"

"My darling," he answered, fearing that some new complication had arisen, and that it behoved him to summon the nurses and

doctors, "how can you think of asking me such a question? You know, that I would willingly lay down my life to save yours"

"Then you must do as I ask you at once," she said, with feverish excitement. "Go at once and book two passages for England in the next boat that sails. Whatever happens, I must follow Maurice. I have a presentiment that if I stay here I shall die. Don't argue with me, papa, but I beseech you do as I ask of you."

"But, dear, you are not at all in the condition to travel," her father expostulated.

"God will give me the necessary strength," she replied. "I feel as certain as I can be of anything that, if I remain here, nothing can save me. I must be near Maurice. Oh, papa, I pray you to do as I ask of you. If you desire to make me happy you cannot do anything better."

To humour her, he promised to do as she wished, and a little later made his way to the doctor's residence in order to hear what he thought of his daughter's strange request. The medico was silent for a few moments, after he had heard Mr. Sherrard out. Then he said:—

"It seems a desperate remedy, but, after

all, this is a desperate case. Do you know, Mr. Sherrard, if I were in your place, I should be inclined to try it. The sea air and the excitement of preparing for the voyage—to say nothing of the knowledge that she is following the man she loves—may chance to set your daughter up. Indeed; I should not be surprised if this was exactly what would happen. At any rate, there can be no harm in leading her to believe that you are willing to agree to her proposal ”

As may be supposed, Mr. Sherrard was only too desirous of doing anything that lay in his power to help his daughter towards recovery. Therefore, from the doctor's house he drove to the office of one of the steamship companies, where he engaged two passages for London. He then returned to his own house, and laid the receipt for the money paid before his daughter.

“ Thank you, papa dear,” she said. “ Now I think you will see that I shall soon get well. In fact I feel better already ”

Strange though it may appear, it is nevertheless true that, from that moment, Nina was a different being—so much so, in fact, that when the doctor next called to see her he even expressed his surprise at the change.

"It is the most wonderful transformation I have ever seen!" he said to Mr. Sherrard afterwards in the sanctity of the drawing room. "It may well be said that desperate cases are often best treated by desperate remedies. Be careful, however, and do not allow her to overtire herself. If the present improvement continues I certainly think she will be quite capable of undertaking the voyage."

In due course, and not a moment too soon for Nina, the mail-boat, next on the list to that by which Maurice had sailed, left the port of Sydney, homeward bound. She had her full complement of passengers, but of all the number there was scarcely one so eager to push on, scarcely one who took such an absorbing interest in the records of each day's run as Mr. Sherrard's daughter. Fortunately for her peace of mind, none of the passengers knew her secret; on the contrary, all who noticed it, ascribed her anxiety to reach England to an ardent desire to be there in time for the great national pageant, which was attracting themselves, together with inhabitants of most of the great nations of the earth. How were they to know that, night and morning in her cabin, she knelt

down and prayed for an unhappy man who was being borne across the ocean to stand his trial for a deed of which she was certain he was innocent.

After what seemed an eternity, they left the Australian coast behind them, and the vessel's head was pointed for Ceylon. In ten days, or thereabouts, they should reach Colombo, and then half their momentous journey would have been accomplished. It would even be something, Nina told herself, to look upon a landscape on which, for a moment, his dear eyes had rested

It might here be stated with advantage that Captain Ferrier, the commander of the vessel by which they were travelling, and Mr. Sherrard were old friends. In consequence the latter was aware that anything he might tell the other would be treated as strictly confidential. For this reason he found an early occasion to make him acquainted with his daughter's love story. The Captain, with all a sailor's kindness of heart, from that moment laid himself out to do everything in his power to promote the comfort and peace of mind of his friend's daughter. Among other things, he permitted her the use of his own private cabin

on the bridge, where she would be at liberty to read and work, out of earshot of the frivolous chattering and gossiping of the promenade deck. He was the possessor of a daughter of the same age as Nina, and this may possibly have made him more sympathetic.

At last they reached Colombo. Nina, unable to bear the noise and excitement of the deck below, where the Singhalese jewellers and pedlars were displaying their wares to the passengers, retreated to the haven of rest permitted her on the bridge. With the exception of the officer on duty, she had the place to herself, for the captain was below, busily engaged with the agent, and the man at the wheel was no longer required. Mr. Sherrard had been occupied in his cabin, but had left it and was on his way to the purser's office with some letters he had written, and which he desired to post, when the latter official accosted him in the alley way.

"A note has just come aboard for you, Mr. Sherrard," he said, "from a gentleman who is staying at the *Grand Oriental*. If you will allow me, I will get it for you. It is in my office."

He did so, and Mr. Sherrard opened it, to

find, with some astonishment, that it was signed John Phillipson, and was to the effect that the writer had received important news concerning Sir Maurice Oglvie which he would be glad to impart to Mr. Sherrard if he could make it convenient to come ashore to see the writer at the *Grand Oriental*.

"I will certainly go at once," said Mr. Sherrard to himself, and returning to his cabin, obtained his helmet and a white umbrella, and descended to a boat alongside.

"Where are you off to?" inquired the skipper, who had come to the rails of the promenade deck.

"I am called ashore on important business," the other replied. "Tell my daughter, will you, that I shall be back in an hour or so?"

On reaching the wharf Mr. Sherrard made his way up the gentle incline that leads to the *Grand Oriental* Hotel, so well known to every visitor to Australia and the Farther East.

"Do you happen to have a gentleman named Phillipson staying here?" he inquired of the clerk in the office.

"Yes, sir," the man answered. "I believe he has just gone up to his room. Is your name Sherrard?"

"Yes, that is my name," the squatter replied. "I should be glad if I could see Mr. Phillipson with as little delay as possible."

"In that case, perhaps you would like to go up to his room, sir?"

When Mr Sherrard had agreed to this proposal, a servant was summoned, and ordered to conduct the gentleman to Mr. Phillipson's room. When they reached it the man knocked once upon the door, and then, without waiting for an answer, threw it open for Mr. Sherrard to enter. The latter did so, to find himself in a cool, airy room, at the window of which a man was standing with his back towards him. If appearances were to be believed he had not heard the knock or the noise of the door opening.

"Mr. Phillipson, I presume?" Mr. Sherrard began.

On hearing his voice, the other swung round.

Then Mr. Sherrard found himself standing face to face with Sir Maurice Ogilvie!

CHAPTER XV

MR. SHERRARD'S surprise may be better imagined than described. He stared at the man before him very much as if he were looking at a ghost.

"You?" he cried at last. "What on earth, man, does this mean? In the name of all that's wonderful, what are you doing here?"

Maurice hastened towards him, and held out his hand.

"My kind old friend," he said, his voice shaking with emotion, "it means many things. First and foremost it means that I am free; more important still, it means that I have been proved innocent of the crime that was brought against me."

Mr. Sherrard has since confessed that he felt as if the world were spinning round with him at the rate of a million miles a second. He sank down into a chair, too bewildered

to speak. At last he found his voice, but all he could say then was :

“ I knew you were innocent ! I have said so from the beginning ! ”

When he recovered somewhat he begged Maurice to furnish him with further particulars.

“ You shall hear everything,” said Maurice. “ Goodness alone knows I shall never tell another story with half so much joy or thankfulness. To-day, when I saw your boat enter the harbour, I felt as if I could have taken the whole world in my arms and have embraced it. One has to suffer like I have done these last few years to understand what it means to be really free, and to be able to look one's fellow man in the face without a trace of fear.”

“ But how did you know that we were on board that boat ? ” Sherrard inquired.

“ Inspector Davidson, or Harbridge, telegraphed to me,” Maurice replied.

“ Ah, I understand. And now continue your story.”

“ Well, as you know, I left Sydney in charge of Inspector Berridge, of Scotland Yard. He treated me with the utmost consideration, and before we had been many

days at sea, I believe we were as good friends as two men, under similar conditions, could hope to be. In due course we put in here. According to rules laid down I was not permitted to go on deck while the vessel was in port, so I spent the first hour or so of our arrival in my cabin, pretending to read, though in reality thinking of Nina and of you. Where Berridge was I could not say, nor did I trouble myself very much about him. About half an hour from the time that we were due to leave here, however, he came below, and unlocked the cabin door. As soon as I set eyes on his face I could see that something unusual had occurred. 'Sir Maurice,' he said, closing the door behind him as he spoke, 'I've news for you that I venture to think will cause you no small amount of happiness.'

"I shook my head. My life just then seemed so devoid of hope that I could not see how happiness could ever come into it again; I inquired, however, what his news might be.

" 'It is neither more nor less than that you are a free man,' he answered 'And I know this,' he continued, 'I was never so glad to give a man good tidings before.'

“ ‘ But tell me all about it,’ I said, feeling sick and giddy with fear lest his tidings might not be true. ‘ I cannot believe it yet.’

“ ‘ You may rely upon what I have said being right,’ he went on. ‘ This is what has happened. Soon after we arrived in harbour this morning, the Commissioner of Police came aboard bringing with him a letter he had received two or three days before from the Home Secretary. It was to the effect that the real murderer of the girl, Burt, commonly known as Connie Plantagenet, had been discovered. It appears he was in prison at Portland. His sentence was a life for robbery with violence. While working in the quarries he was crushed by a large stone, which fell upon him. Finding that his case was hopeless, and being anxious to clear his conscience as far as possible before he died, he confessed that on the night that you left London, he was in Musgrave Street, near Shaftesbury Avenue. He was starving and desperate. He had no money, and nothing in the world save the rags he was wearing and a razor which he had been unable to pawn. When, therefore, a brougham came along, and he noticed that a girl sat inside it with a necklace of diamonds round her throat, he sud-

denly decided, after he had seen you alight, to become possessed of the jewels. No one was near him, so he hastened across the road, opened the door of the vehicle very quietly, and got in without attracting the coachman's attention. It appears that the latter was looking after you. The girl, finding the strange ruffian beside her, was about to raise an alarm, but before she could do so, he had seized her by the throat, and with one stroke of the razor had killed her. Then a block in the traffic caused a stoppage of about five minutes. While it lasted, and the coachman was having an altercation with a cabman on his right, the assassin opened the door on the left and alighted as quietly as he had got in. No one appeared to have observed his action, or to have detected that there was anything wrong in the carriage. His story, however, has been amply corroborated since, and the fact proved that he sold half of the diamonds to a dealer in Paris and the remainder to a Jew in Amsterdam.'

"I can assure you, Mr. Sherrard," Maurice went on, "that as soon as I heard all this I broke down completely. I could scarcely believe that I was free, free to return to Sydney, and, if you would give her to me, free

to claim Nina's hand. Free to go wherever I pleased ; all the world over to be known by my own name, and once more to live my life as an honest man."

"But why did we not hear of this before we left Sydney ? "

"I am of opinion that it could only have been known to the authorities after your departure."

As was afterwards discovered, this theory proved to be correct. Harbridge had telegraphed to Mr. Sherrard at Albany. The message, however, did not catch him, as the vessel had sailed before it had arrived.

After Maurice had finished his story a silence fell upon the pair for a few moments.

"We must break the news carefully to Nina," said Mr. Sherrard. "In the present state of her health the shock may prove too much for her. She has been very poorly since you said good-bye to her."

"Don't they say that good news never kills ? " said Maurice. "However, have your way. After such weeks of agony I can afford to wait a little."

"No, you shall not wait," said the other. "You must hasten aboard with me at once. Come along, Sir William Phillipson Patterson

Ogilvie, and you shall be presented to the girl who has loved you through thick and thin, through good and ill report, and who will make you one of the best wives that ever mortal man had."

"Amen to that," said Maurice. "How I shall be able to make it up to her for her belief in me I cannot say."

"Make her happy, that is all I ask of you," said Mr. Sherrard. "For my part I believe you will be able to do that. Oh, Ogilvie, my lad—for I must call you by that name now—you cannot imagine how happy I am. I feel as if a weight that had been crushing me for months past, had been suddenly lifted from my shoulders. Now let us make our way to the boat."

Side by side the two men descended to the basement of the hotel. When Maurice had paid his bill they hastened down to the wharf. A boat was soon procured, and they thereupon set off for the steamer. Though they carefully studied the faces of the passengers at the bulwarks, there was no sign of Nina to be discovered there. For this, as you may suppose, they were devoutly thankful. Having reached the promenade deck, Mr. Sherrard bade his companion go to the smoking-

room, ordering him not to leave it until he was summoned elsewhere. He himself ascended the ladder to the bridge, where he found the captain in earnest conversation with his daughter.

"Ferrier," he said as he approached them, "if you flirt so abominably with my girl I shall have to tell your wife when next I come to England. What do you say, Nina?"

There was something about her father's manner that caused the girl to look at him in surprise. When she had seen him that morning he had seemed almost like an old man. Now he had recovered all his buoyancy, and appeared to be as happy as ever she had seen him. While she was so unhappy it seemed almost unkind of him to jest. With a little sigh she resumed the work she had in hand and resolved to think no more about it.

"Just a word with you in private, Ferrier, if you don't mind," said Mr. Sherrard.

"By all means," said the captain. "Come along to the chart-room. We shall be alone there."

When the door was shut upon them the captain turned to his companion.

"Look here, Sherrard," he said, "there's

something the matter with you. What is it ? You look as if you had heard good news "

" And so I have," the other returned, rubbing his hands together as he spoke. " Such news as I have not heard for many a long day. Ferrier, you must congratulate me. I've got to break it to my daughter, and how to do it I can't think. It will kill her with pure thankfulness "

" Ah ! " said the captain " Then the news concerns Sir Maurice Ogilvie ? "

" I should rather think it did," Mr Sherard replied " Man alive, will you believe me when I tell you that the real murderer has been discovered and that Ogilvie is free ? He's in the smoking room at this moment, waiting to come up "

" But what brought it all about ? "

" I'll tell you A letter from the Home Secretary met them here, and in consequence Ogilvie was released forthwith They have discovered the man who did the deed He confessed at Portland. What shall I say to Nina ? "

" My dear sir," the captain returned, " if you will be guided by me, you will leave the matter in my hands. You are not in a condition to break the news to your daughter.

You would frighten her to death. Now go down to Ogilvie and bring him up here. I will see Miss Nina, and break the matter to her as gently as I know how."

"Go then, and may good luck attend you. I'm off to fetch Maurice"

The captain departed on his errand, while Mr. Sherrard went down the ladder to the smoking-room. There he found Maurice, pacing up and down in an agony of impatience. Together they ascended to the chart-room, where they were presently joined by the captain.

"Sir Maurice," said the latter, when they had been introduced, "allow me to offer you my most hearty congratulations on your good fortune. You have suffered a great deal, and most unjustly. However, if I know anything about this sort of thing, the future will make ample amends to you. Will you come with me to see Miss Sherrard?"

Taking Maurice by the arm he led him towards his own cabin, the door of which he opened. Maurice entered, and saw before him a girl, with a pale sweet face, supporting herself by a chair.

"Maurice," cried a voice that flew to the centre of his heart, and stayed there.

"Maurice, my darling! At last you have come-back to me."

Ten minutes or so later, Mr. Sherrard, who could wait no longer, entered the cabin with what appeared to be a desire to shake everyone by the hand, at one and the same time. Never was an old gentleman so excited! When the captain's steward burst in upon them unexpectedly, it was he who pushed him out again, and, so rumour has it, thrust into the astonished youth's hand a Bank of England note for five pounds, "with his blessing and good wishes for a happy marriage!"

Of course the news of Maurice's release spread like lightning through the ship, and when the little party had collected their baggage, and had announced their intention of returning to the shore in order to await the arrival of the next boat back to Australia, the entire ship's company—first second and steerage passengers, to say nothing of sailors and firemen—attended to witness their departure, and gave them three ringing cheers, that might have been heard at the Cinnamon Gardens. Not the feeblest of them all was the voice of the captain's steward.

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Foremost among the many famous Australian Pastoralist firms of to-day may be reckoned that of Sherrard and Ogilvie, who own properties in no less than four of the five colonies. If you were to search the country through, you would not find a happier couple than Sir Maurice and Lady Ogilvie.

The baronetcy, I understand, is not likely to become extinct, for the reason that there are two exceedingly handsome and healthy-looking young gentlemen in reserve to carry on the line. Sometimes, though she tries not to think of it, Nina recalls that truly awful time when she thought Maurice was lost to her for ever. She has found her consolation, however, in the love of a good husband, and that of her children. As for Mr. Sherrard, her father, he has proved himself one of the most indulgent of grand-parents. The eldest boy he prophesies, will be as good a manager of a Station as his father, while the second, he thinks, may eventually become an admiral, having a strong predilection for the sea. There is, however, a certain bonnie little maid with beautiful eyes, that she has inherited from her mother, who, I fancy, whatever he may say to the contrary, holds his heart in the hollow of her hand.

“Let her only be as good a woman as her mother,” says the father, when the old gentleman speaks to him about her, “and I shall be satisfied.”

THE END

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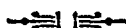
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